

Small steps, little hope

Both Arab and US officials expect very little from the "small steps" Madeleine Albright was able to take during her first Middle East visit

Saharan poll

MOROCCAN officials and Western Saharan representatives have agreed to hold a referendum on whether Western Sahara should be independent or part of Morocco.

Former US Secretary of State James Baker, currently acting as a special UN mediator, said on Tuesday that the referendum could be held within the next 10 or 11 months if the necessary preparations begin immediately, AP reported.

Following three days of talks at the Baker Institute for Public Policy in Houston, Texas, representatives of Morocco, the Polisario Front, Algeria and Mauritania agreed on a code of conduct for the referendum, on the method of identifying eligible voters, and on the role of the UN during the transitional phase, Baker said.

Mine ban

DELEGATES from over a hundred nations yesterday adopted by acclamation a draft treaty calling for an immediate and total ban on anti-personnel mines. The delegates will meet again today in Oslo, Norway, to hold a formal vote, Reuters reported.

The treaty is due to be signed in Ottawa, Canada, in December. The United States, however, could not approve the draft treaty, US delegation head Eric Newsum expressed reservations about the wording of the treaty and voiced frustration that his request for an extra 24 hours of discussions was turned down.

Washington has now to either join a treaty it is opposed to or risk international reproach for not doing so.

On Tuesday, the US lobbied unsuccessfully for several opt-outs that would have allowed it to continue using landmines in the Korean Peninsula for nine more years and would have exempted its "smart" anti-personnel mines from the ban. The US also wanted countries to be able to withdraw from the treaty if they fall victim to aggression.

The move to ban land mines has proceeded with unusual speed after the death of Britain's Princess Diana, who had campaigned for such a ban.

Road horror

TWENTY-NINE children aged between 12 and 17 were killed in a horrific accident Tuesday after a truck driving them to work on cotton fields ran off the road and overturned in a canal near the town of Basyoun in Kafri El-Sheikh province, 120 kilometres north of Cairo. According to the police, 54 children and teenagers were also injured. Except for two - who suffered brain injuries, all the injured children have been released from nearby hospitals.

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Madeleine Albright came back from her first trip to the Middle East, convinced that the situation in the region was worse than she had expected.

"I think the situation is even worse than I thought," the US secretary of state said during a stopover in Shannon. "I think that it's fairly tattered."

Administration insiders told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that Albright was taken aback by the refusal of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to honour Israel's commitments under the Oslo Accords. He argued that his government would collapse if he ordered a halt to the construction of settlements or agreed to a second troop redeployment in the West Bank.

Consequently, Albright was left with limited options. The first is to continue pressing Yasser Arafat to crack down on the infrastructure of Hamas and Jihad in the self-rule territories. The second is to address the other issues by taking what she called "small steps, when large steps are needed."

"At least, the parties will be talking again," she said, referring to one of the few concrete results that emerged from her tour - a new round of discussions next Tuesday in Washington between Israelis and Palestinians, with Dennis Ross officiating. There will be a follow-up meeting in New York the following week. Albright, who will be there for the UN General Assembly session, invited Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy and Abu Mazen, Arafat's right-hand man, for talks.

Administration officials told the *Weekly* that "expectations are extremely low" for both sets of talks. "Unfortunately, there is no agreement yet about the basis for such negotiations."

Neither did the Palestinians appear to set much hope on the planned meetings, viewing them, rather, as a test of the intentions of both Netanyahu and the US administration.

Saeed Ereikat, minister of local administration, said

that "it is too early to tell where matters will be heading but right now they are taking a serious turn." He said any revival of the peace negotiations should be based on "working out solutions to the obstacles which forced the peace process to come to a halt."

This meant that the Palestinians will stick to their demands: a halt to Israeli settlement construction, implementing the interim steps of the Oslo Accords while opening parallel negotiations on final status arrangements.

Nabil Abu Rudeineh, an Arafat adviser, said: "I fear the Washington and New York meetings will be a waste of time. Albright was here and nothing happened."

He added: "The Americans are making political moves, with no concrete results. Albright made an important tour and made important statements and publicly took very important positions. But there are no concrete results." Abu Rudeineh attributed this to the Americans' failure to put pressure on Netanyahu.

"The situation is grave, explosive and more serious than many people think," he said. "It may escalate to a confrontation or even a war, due to the absence of a real American effort and Israeli intransigence."

Arafat will take the Palestinians' case to a conference of Arab foreign ministers opening in Cairo on Saturday and to a number of European countries which he plans to visit afterwards.

According to Nabil Shaath, minister of planning and international cooperation, Arafat was informed by the European Union's envoy Miguel Moratinos that the EU planned to clamp limited economic sanctions against Israel if it continued to violate the European-Israeli and European-Palestinian partnership agreements by blockading Palestinian exports to Europe. The EU asked the Israeli government to respond to Palestinian complaints in this connection before the end of this month, Shaath said.

The Palestinians were angered by Albright's declaration that "Hamas and the Islamic Jihad were the main enemy of the average Palestinian."

"Albright's imbalance is stark, blunt and scandalous," said Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabboon. According to Marwan Kanafani, Arafat's media adviser, the Palestinian Authority's chairman told Albright he could not put people behind bars just because Netanyahu feels like it. Arafat asked Albright if she would guarantee that the US Congress would not place the PA on the list of states violating human rights should he heed her demand to crack down on Hamas and Jihad, Kanafani said.

"The role played by Albright was very limited and I think that the only outcome of her visit is that she exercised more pressure on the Palestinians to push ahead with security coordination with the Israelis," said PA Minister Abdel-Jawad Saleh. "I look at the future of the peace process and all I see is much darkness."

According to sources in Cairo, Albright made it clear to Egyptian officials that she could not convince Netanyahu to soften his policies. This, the sources said, meant that any progress in the peace process is unlikely until some domestic change takes place in Israel, such as a Likud-Labour coalition coming to power.

The sources believe that Arafat has already gone a long way in containing the Islamist militants and that there is a limit to the number of people he can round up without undermining his image as a leader of his people. Ahmed Maher, the Egyptian ambassador in Washington, said: "We have to wait and see what comes out of the meetings scheduled to take place in Washington and New York, whether there will be real movement from the Israeli side or not."

Hoda Tewfik in Washington, Tarek Hassan in Gaza, Khalid Amayreh in Jerusalem, Dina Ezzat in Cairo



Palestinians in Bethlehem's Deheisbah camp stage a mock funeral for the Oslo Accords, on their fourth anniversary, 13 September (photo: Reuters)

Hebronising Jerusalem

No sooner had Madeleine Albright departed the region, than Jewish settlers moved on yet another Palestinian neighbourhood. Graham Usher writes from Jerusalem

For the Palestinian leadership, one of the very few highlights of Madeleine Albright's recent trip to the region was her suggestion that Israel should "desist" from taking unilateral actions which Palestinians "perceive" as provocative. Forty-eight hours after she left Jerusalem another "unilateral action" occurred which, in its political provocation, may spark consequences akin to those that followed the opening of the Western Wall tunnel in Jerusalem a year ago.

At around 10pm on Sunday night, 15 Jewish settlers, protected (said eyewitnesses) by "dozens" of supporters from the "Our Jerusalem" settler movement, took over a two-storey house in Ras Al-Amud, a Palestinian village that lies on the outskirts of the Old City in occupied East Jerusalem.

The settlers claim the two Palestinian families who had been living in the building had already vacated the premises. Palestinians, however, said at least one Palestinian family was turned out by the settlers. Whatever the facts, Palestinians from Ras Al-Amud converged on the scene, clashing with Israeli border police and trashing parked cars with Israeli number plates.

Within hours of the take-over, several hundred Border Police had thrown a cordon around the house and commandeered the site of a private Palestinian bus company that lies adjacent to it. Checkpoints were also set up on one of the two main roads leading to the village. "We are living in Hebron," said Nalila Hamdan, a resident of Ras Al-Amud whose tile factory sits behind the house.

Hebron is the right analogy, both in terms of the settlers' dubious claim on the land and in terms of what is likely to happen should they be allowed to stay put.

The settlers claim they are renting the house in Ras Al-Amud from its "legal" owner, Irving Muszkowitz, an American Jewish magnate who over the last decade has acquired Palestinian properties in several East Jerusalem villages and the Old City (as well as providing funds to finance the Western Wall tunnel). Muszkowitz says he bought 3.5 acres of land in Ras Al-Amud several years ago from a Jewish religious foundation and intends to build a new "Jewish neighbourhood" of at least 75 houses on the site. Palestinians from Ras Al-Amud who have claims on the land say the sale to Muszkowitz was fraudulent and has yet to be decided by an Israeli court.

What is not in dispute is that Ras Al-Amud is an exclusively Palestinian community of 11,000 inhabitants which in recent memory has never had a Jewish presence other than in the ancient Jewish cemetery that rests opposite the village on the Mount of Olives. It is this Palestinian reality that Muszkowitz wants to change. "As a Jew, I desire to see the Mount of Olives not only as a place for the dead but also for the living," he told *Israel's Haaretz* newspaper on Tuesday.

Benjamin Netanyahu's response to the take-over was to feign ignorance and denounce it. Claiming no foreknowledge of the settler's action, on Monday Netanyahu said "what is happening in Ras Al-Amud is not good for Jerusalem and not good for the state of Israel." Rather, decisions to do with Jerusalem should be in accordance with a "government masterplan" and not by "private initiative". It was a line echoed by Foreign Minister David Levy and Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, who described the settlers' takeover as a "catalyst for further violence in the capital."

But there are growing doubts over just how "private" was the action. According to a report by Nahum Barnea in the Israeli daily *Ha-Aharoni* on Tuesday, Netanyahu knew of the settlers' intentions last week but asked them to defer the takeover until Albright was out of the country. A *Haaretz* editorial on the same day says the settlers' entry into Ras Al-Amud appeared to be "coordinated" with the Border Police, a claim reinforced by Palestinian eyewitnesses who insist that the police came with the settlers and not (as the police allege) "after them".

The suspicion is that Netanyahu was thus in on the act, a view bolstered by comments by him since the takeover that it may be difficult to evict the settlers "within the law."

Following "consultations" with senior colleagues aimed at reaching a solution that would satisfy the two wings of his coalition, Netanyahu offered the settlers "a compromise solution", whereby they would vacate the two Palestinian houses in Ras Al-

Amud and be replaced by 10 Jewish semi-nary students who would renovate the buildings. Netanyahu would also recognise the settlers' "right" to settle in the Palestinian neighbourhood. The settlers, joined by Muszkowitz, rejected the offer and lodged an appeal with the Supreme Court to prevent police from evicting them.

Apart from the initial clashes, Palestinians reaction has been muted, preferring to let the Israeli Peace Now Movement take the lead in protests in the village. The hope is that international and domestic Israeli pressure will prevail on Netanyahu and his coalition to remove the settlers. But the arguments are not encouraging.

"Experience tells us that whenever Jews settle in the heart of an Arab neighbourhood, there will be an explosion," said PLO Executive Committee member with special responsibility for Jerusalem, Faisal Husseini, on Tuesday. Experience also tells Palestinians that once settlers are into a place, it is mighty difficult to get them out - for testimony, the residents of Ras Al-Amud need only look south to Hebron.

Reaching out for Russia

Egypt will seek to cement economic ties with Russia during President Mubarak's visit to Moscow next week. Neville Khalil reviews the president's agenda

President Hosni Mubarak will arrive in Russia on Monday for a three-day visit - his first since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Promoting economic cooperation will be at the centre of Mubarak's agenda, but political issues such as Middle East peace-making and increasing the number of permanent members of the UN security council will also be discussed.

Russia, which began co-sponsoring the peace process with the US in 1991, only one year before the demise of the USSR, has been preoccupied of late with its own domestic problems. Grappling with an about-turn in economic and political policy after nearly 75 years of communist rule, Russia turned inwards to re-assert itself as a major power.

Although the Arabs involved in the peace process would have liked to see Russia balance out the US bias towards Israel, Middle East peace-making was no longer a real priority for Moscow, which had to address more pressing issues such as reforming the economy, controlling mushrooming organised crime and keeping the separatists at bay.

Egypt is acting now to enhance bilateral relations with Russia, focusing on greater cooperation between the private sectors of both countries. The delegation accompanying Mubarak includes 24 businessmen, many of whom are already involved in the Russian market. Russia is also seen as an economic window to other former Soviet Union states, or members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

"Economic cooperation with Russia will be through the private sector," Mubarak said yesterday, "the public sector will not take part in creating new companies." In a two-hour preparatory meeting with a large number of ministers, Mubarak said that the "utmost efforts should be exerted to open new markets and increase trade." He noted that Egyptian products must be of "top quality" in order to be able to compete in the new markets of the CIS. During Mubarak's state visit, six

agreements will be signed on the promotion and protection of investments, the avoidance of double taxation, security cooperation, which includes extradition of criminals and combating organised crime, as well as cooperation in scientific research.

Egypt is greatly interested in Russian technical know-how, especially in the field of the peaceful uses of nuclear power. Also, a protocol governing cooperation in higher education will be renewed for three more years.

Other documents expected to be finalised by the time Mubarak arrives in Moscow, include a maritime agreement and another between the ministries of justice in both countries. Egypt's Export Development Bank will also try to reach a memorandum of understanding regarding insurance on exports and imports.

The private sector is expected to create a joint venture company for the promotion of industrial exports, and another for agricultural goods, as well as a transport company, which will provide sea, river and road transport for exchanged goods at reasonable prices. The company will be formed in conjunction with the Ukraine, which controls the ports en route from Egypt to Russia and other CIS markets.

Mubarak's visit, according to Rafiq Salhabeddin, adviser to the minister of international cooperation, should give "a very powerful push" to bilateral economic relations. "We are going into a new phase because both countries now have a market economy," Salhabeddin told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. "Economic cooperation should basically be carried out by the private sector."

Salhabeddin, who took part in meetings of a preparatory committee ahead of Mubarak's arrival, said that the Egyptian government is acting to "make it easier for the private sector in both Egypt and Russia to interact vigorously and in a manner that would eventually lead to extensive cooperation." He said that the "basic objective" of the committee was to support the business com-

munity. "We are simply there to help the private sector," Salhabeddin said of the committee which includes nearly 20 businessmen, most of whom have dealings with Russia.

He emphasised that the investment protection and taxation agreements "would encourage and help business people to carry out their activities in a comfortable atmosphere." The main problems that still hinder Egyptian investments in Russia are transport and bank transactions. These two obstacles will be addressed through the proposed Egyptian-Russian-Ukrainian transport company and the possible creation of a joint venture bank. The Egyptian Nile Bank would like to launch a joint venture or a representative office in Russia, to cut the costs required by international banks.

"Russia is a big and central market, and we think that if we establish a good healthy relationship by exchanging goods, this could also serve to foster relations with other neighbouring CIS states," Salhabeddin said. Exports to Russia include agricultural products and imports are basically raw materials and machinery.

According to statistics provided by the International Trade Point of Egypt, trade between Egypt and Russia stands almost 10 times in favour of Russia, with more than \$400 million-worth of exports to Egypt. In 1992, trade between the two countries was worth just over \$37 million, of which Egyptian exports amounted to about \$36 million. However, four years after the break up of the Soviet Union the trade balance shifted dramatically in favour of Russia. In 1996, Egypt only exported about \$37.6 million-worth of goods to Russia, while importing products worth \$370.4 million.

A government source involved in Egyptian-Russian economic relations said that although the current balance of trade between the two countries is heavily in Russia's favour, Egypt is intent on establishing joint ventures to promote its exports to Russia.

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Allaying Egyptian concerns

Cairo, satisfied by Ankara's assurances regarding military cooperation with Israel, appears ready to undertake a mediation effort between Turkey and Syria. Nevine Khalil reports from Alexandria

For nearly two hours on Tuesday, President Hosni Mubarak and Turkish President Suleyman Demirel discussed outstanding issues which have overshadowed Arab-Turkish relations for over a year. The talks, which took place at the Ras El-Tin Palace in Alexandria, dealt with a scheduled Turkish-Israeli military exercise, tension in Syrian-Turkish relations, Middle East peace-making as well as bilateral ties.

The exercises, involving Turkey, Israel and the US, set for November in the eastern Mediterranean, are officially described as rehearsals for joint search and rescue operations, but have been viewed with great suspicion in the Arab world. Cairo criticised the exercises, especially since they come at a time when Arab states are furious at the policies of Israel's right-wing government under the leadership of Benjamin Netanyahu.

Mubarak and Demirel have extensively discussed the Turkish-Israeli military cooperation agreement since it was signed last year, and this week Cairo said it was satisfied with Ankara's assurances. "I got a very good explanation from the president," Mubarak told a joint news conference. "The exercise is going to be limited to search and rescue. I think it could pass easily." Mubarak expressed the hope, however, that advanced combat exercises between Turkey and Israel would not take place until a comprehensive peace is established in the region.

Demirel defended military cooperation with Israel, saying that it was only a "blueprint agreement," which is similar to ones signed between Turkey and 28 other countries. "It has nothing to do with the peace process," he said. Turkey's regional neighbours, especially Syria and Iran are opposed to the accord, viewing it as a threat to the balance of force in the region. Demirel insisted, however, that Turkey's ties with Israel are not against a "third country." "No one should even have a suspicion," he added. Demirel, in an interview with *Al-Ahram* published on the day of his visit, said that Arab countries were welcome

to join the exercise, even if only as observers.

Mubarak, with Demirel at his side, objected.

"We have no intention of [taking part] in the exercise with the Israelis for the time being, until the problem in the Middle East comes to an end," he said. Mubarak continued that Egypt has "no objection" to closer ties between Turkey, "a friendly country," and Israel with which "we have relations". He asserted that Turkey supports the rights of the Palestinians and at the same time has "very good" relations with Israel which, Mubarak said, can be made use of in future "mediation between the Israelis and Palestinians".

"Arab countries are the brothers of Turkey," Demirel told reporters. "We don't have any problems with the Arabs that need to be settled by using force. This misunderstanding must be eliminated."

Tensions between Damascus and Ankara continue to rise, however. Turkey is accusing Syria of sponsoring Kurdish separatist rebels in its southeastern border region, while Damascus believes that Ankara is trying to block its water supply from the Euphrates River.

In the *Al-Ahram* interview, Demirel reiterated his accusations against Syria, but added that he would be "very pleased" if Mubarak made a mediation effort between Damascus and Ankara. Mubarak told the news conference that he would take up the matter with Syria's President Hafez Al-Assad when they meet today (Thursday) in Alexandria for talks. "I will tell him [Assad] what I heard from President Demirel," Mubarak said.

Later in the day, Mubarak said that he had "a very strong feeling" Assad would be forthcoming in solving the outstanding problems with Turkey. In statements made after Demirel's departure, the Egyptian president said that Assad



Reassuring talks: Mubarak with Demirel in Alexandria last week

wants to improve relations with Turkey and I am sure of his desire to negotiate over the problems". Mubarak added that he would also convey Turkey's clarifications regarding the military exercises to other Arab leaders. "I trust in what [Demirel] told me," Mubarak said. "I respect [his] word."

A senior adviser to Demirel said before the visit that "Turkey does not have a policy of forging pacts in the Middle East. We believe peace can come to the region only by cooperation among countries," he said.

Another issue on the table was Turkey's regular incursions into the north of neighbouring Iraq in hot pursuit of Kurdish rebels. Cairo supports Iraq's territorial integrity, and feels that Ankara's military activities beyond its southeastern border are unjustified.

In the *Al-Ahram* interview, Demirel said that Turkish troops enter Iraq's northern territories for limited "cleansing" operations, because Baghdad cannot control the border region.

"The vacuum which was created in northern Iraq after the Gulf war caused a serious threat to both Turkey and Iraq," Demirel said, "therefore Turkey had no other choice but to take appropriate action to uproot terrorism in that region."

He added, however, that Ankara remains committed to upholding Iraq's sovereignty over its territories. Cairo has opposed a Turkish proposal for creating a buffer or security zone in both Turkish and Iraqi territories, saying that such a zone cannot be created unilaterally without consultations with the neighbouring state.

Differences aside

For the time being the Egyptian and US administrations are choosing to put their differences on the back-burner. Dina Ezzat reports

Egyptian-US relations seemed to be doing well during American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit to Cairo last week. "The main focus of discussion between Albright and senior Egyptian officials was the current situation of the Middle East peace process, but they also touched upon some issues of bilateral concern," said one Egyptian source.

While some US-Egyptian differences were raised, such as the Cairo-Tehran relations and the cold peace between Egypt and Israel, both sides seemed willing to steer clear away from areas of contention.

With news resurfacing of serious Iranian efforts to approach Egypt for economic and military cooperation in order to counter-balance what seems to be an inevitable Turkish-Israeli alliance, the visiting US delegation expressed concern over a potential Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement at this stage. The issue is considered particularly important to the US in view of the recent warnings addressed by President Hosni Mubarak to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about the impact the stagnation in the peace process could have on the regional balance of power.

"I think the Americans made it clear that they would not welcome [Egypt] siding with Iran at the time being," said one source. He added, "To be honest, what Egypt would get out of restoring its relations with Iran at this stage would not amount to what it could lose by straining its ties with Washington."

Egypt has substantial economic ties with the US. Cairo is one of only three countries, with Russia and South Africa, that is firmly linked with the US in a long-term economic partnership in the framework of the Mubarak-Gore initiative which fosters cooperation in the fields of economy, technology and education. Egypt is also second only to Israel as one of the largest receivers of US economic and military assistance which together amount to \$2.1 billion a year. Today, there are about 2,000 US companies in Egypt, 200 of which have permanent offices in Cairo.

Within the framework of economic discussions, Albright again stressed Washington's position that all countries in the region need to participate in the Fourth Middle East/North Africa economic conference that is scheduled to be held in Doha in November. According to one source, it was tentatively established that Egypt would send a low-ranking official delegation there to avoid suggesting that other Arab states boycott the forum "but the Egyptian side insisted that it would only upgrade its delegation and encourage influential businessmen to go if the peace process moved ahead."

It was clear, nevertheless, that in their dis-

cussion of the current impasse in the peace process, there were areas "where the two parties did not see eye-to-eye". Indeed, while the Egyptian side feels that it is time for the US to exercise serious pressure on the Israeli prime minister, the US tends to ask Egypt to urge the Palestinians to exert more efforts on the security front. Nonetheless, Albright made it clear to Egyptian officials that she has been and will be trying to get Netanyahu to slow down on the building of settlements. "The only promise she made is that she will try," revealed an Egyptian source.

The Egyptian side warned again that Netanyahu's policies are driving the entire region to the brink of an abyss and that if they are left unchecked, militant Islamist activities in many countries in the region could escalate.

As one Egyptian source confirmed, the discussions were "lengthy, detailed and frank but with generally limited dwelling on the long list of differences", such as Egypt's concern over US congressional claims that Copts are persecuted in Egypt and over the US role in southern Sudan. Also kept low on the agenda were discussions of the US concerns over Cairo's warm relations with Libya, which Washington sees as a potential threat to stability in the region. Another area of disagreement is Washington's continued veto over the future re-integration of Iraq into the international community.

The political and economic ties between Cairo and Washington are generally described by both capitals as "close", "friendly" and "sincere".

As one senior US official stated in a telephone interview with *Al-Ahram Weekly*, "the US respects and values Egypt's central role in the region and its support for the peace process, and it is committed to continue working with Egypt for the future, not just for the sake of the region but also for the sake of a stable and prosperous Egypt."

On the eve of Albright's arrival to the region last week, Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Moussa described the bilateral relations between the two countries "as very important from the Egyptian perspective". And in statements following Albright's departure, Moussa further affirmed Cairo's positive assessment of bilateral relations: "Egyptian-US relations, as such, are good and developing on several fronts."

Moussa pointed out, however, that the pro-Israel lobby in US was doing its utmost to try and sour relations between Cairo and Washington. But diplomatic sources told the *Weekly* that in recent weeks Egypt has been expressing its dissatisfaction with the US contribution to the peace process. Senior Egyptian officials tried to get that message across to Washington through common allies in order to avoid straining bilateral relations.

Militants sentenced

The Supreme Military Court sentenced four Islamist militants to death and eight others to life imprisonment on Monday at the conclusion of one of the most publicised trials since the outbreak of violence in late 1992. Khaled Dawoud attended

Only a handful of journalists were allowed inside the Haikstep military camp Monday morning to witness the conclusion of the two-month trial of 98 members of the underground Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiya. Dozens of army soldiers, plain clothes policemen and officers from different security branches were on the alert at the camp's entrance, facing hundreds of relatives, mostly heavily-veiled women and children, who stood there from the early morning waiting for permission to attend the sentencing session.

Permission was denied, and the relatives waited for hours in vain. For security reasons, they were only informed of the sentences through lawyers and journalists after the defendants were taken back to prison under heavy police protection.

According to police, the Gama'a members sentenced on Monday were among the most dangerous elements of the group. They were held responsible for the worst wave of violence that hit Egypt in 1994, including the bombing of nine banks and the assassination of top security officers. Among their victims was Maj. Gen. Raouf Khairat, a top State Security officer in charge of combating Islamist violence.

The number of defendants who stood trial was the largest ever grouped in one case since the government started putting militants on trial before military tribunals in late 1992. The fact that the defendants included five women, for the first time in such cases, was another factor

that gave the trial additional publicity.

It was also at the opening session of this trial on 5 July that one of the defendants, Mohamed Abdel-Alim, announced the controversial cease-fire appeal by imprisoned Gama'a and Jihad leaders who are serving life terms for their roles in the assassination of the late President Anwar El-Sadat in 1981. He quoted the "historic" leaders of the two groups as saying that they appealed to their followers to stop unilaterally all anti-government attacks inside and outside Egypt.

Despite signs from the government that it would welcome a halt to violence, particularly after the cease-fire appeal won the support of the Gama'a's spiritual guide Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman, who is imprisoned in New York. Interior Minister Hassan Al-Ali later ruled out any dialogue with "terrorists and thugs." Gama'a leaders living abroad had opposed the call for ending violence, and their followers hiding in sugar cane fields in southern Egypt did not stop their attacks against policemen.

This division, and the fact that the militants' attacks continued, led some observers to believe that the whole matter was nothing but a ploy by Islamist lawyers to influence the military court and allow the defendants to get away with light sentences.

If this was a ploy, it failed. The judge opened the concluding session earlier than usual. Before handing down the sentences, he read out a statement, lashing out at

militant groups, and describing their young members as deceived and brain-washed by expatriate leaders who provide the necessary funding. He added that those "young, ignorant extremists have imposed themselves as judges, issuing orders of killing and terror. They have nothing to do with Islam and its merciful teachings. On the contrary, they damage the name of this great religion."

According to a standard practice, the judge began with the acquittals and lighter sentences, ending up with capital punishment. Twenty-five militants, including a woman, were acquitted. A 55-year-old mother of four was sentenced to one year, five defendants to three years, nine, including two women, to five years, six to seven years, 16 to 10 years, 23, including a woman, to 15 years, eight to life imprisonment and four to death. Charges were dropped against one defendant after he died in prison shortly before the case opened. Abdel-Alim, the Gama'a spokesman during the trial, was among those sentenced to 15 years.

When the names of the acquitted 25 were being read out, sighs of relief and the words *Allahu Akbar* (God is Great) could be heard from the defendants kept in a large cage covered by wire. When the sentences became harsher, there was silence. This silence was followed by angry shouts and anti-government slogans immediately after the judge read out the names of those sentenced to death.

The young militants, mostly bearded and

ressed in white, turned towards those who were sentenced to death to congratulate them. One of the four, Mohamed Fawzi, has attended all sessions of the trial in a red prison costume given to those on death row because he had been condemned to death in an earlier trial last year. Fawzi was convicted of killing a police officer in the city of Suez.

"I do not care," he said before the sentences were pronounced. "I cannot be killed twice." Fawzi said that in a farewell party his "brothers" gave him in prison before Monday's session, they were joking which of the two death sentences should be carried out: the one handed down last year by the State Security Court or the one they expected to be passed by the military court.

Fawzi told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that he did not feel sorry for what he did. "I am proud, and my family is proud. I am going to die for the cause I fought for." He then joined the other defendants in shouting slogans announcing their support for Omar Abdel-Rahman as their leader. "Prison and execution will not distance us from Islam," they also shouted.

Mohamed Mustafa Ismail, another militant sentenced to death, said: "I am a winner. I will go to heaven with three martyrs." Asked what he would tell his three children, Ismail said that they should follow their father's path.

But this was not the reaction of the wife of Ahmed Abdel-Fattah, a third militant sentenced to death. She stood outside the court with her

6-year-old daughter crying over the fate of her husband. "Death sentences are not useful. They only generate more anger and frustration," she said.

Mosheer Abdel-Samad, an Islamist lawyer who attended the session, told reporters he had expected an even larger number of defendants to be condemned to death. But he criticised the sentences against the women, saying they were "too harsh." He explained that most of those women "fell under the pressure of their husbands," and were forced to hide the explosives seized in their possession.

Montasser El-Zayyat, another lawyer who led efforts to convince the government that the cease-fire appeal issued by the Gama'a leaders should be taken seriously, also criticised the sentences as harsh. He said the judges did not consider the good-will gesture offered by the Gama'a leaders and that the sentences might jeopardise his efforts to gain additional support for a halt to violence.

Abdel-Alim, asked how the sentences would affect the cease-fire initiative, did not show much interest. "We issued an appeal to stop violence, and you have the result. More death and life imprisonment sentences," he said. He added, however, that the leaders in prison continue to be committed to their call and tried to find excuses for expatriate leaders who opposed the initiative. "There is a lack of communication. They cannot believe that this initiative was taken voluntarily," he added.

Journalists convicted of slander

A Cairo court has sentenced three Egyptian and three Saudi journalists — five of them in absentia — to imprisonment for slandering President Mubarak's two sons

The Abdin Misdemeanours Court sentenced in absentia on Sunday three Saudi Arabian and two Egyptian journalists, working for the London-based Saudi daily *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, to one year imprisonment with hard labour after finding them guilty of slandering the two sons of President Hosni Mubarak, reports Khaled Dawoud. The five were also fined LE20,000 each. A sixth journalist working for the local opposition daily *Al-Wafd* was sentenced to six months imprisonment and fined LE15,000 after he was convicted on the same charges.

The court ordered the six to pay Alaa and Gamal Mubarak LE501 in temporary compensation which, according to Egyptian law, means that the Mubaraks have the right to sue the Saudi newspaper for damages.

The court set bail at LE1,000 each, pending an appeal before a higher court. A week before the sentences were handed down, several top lawyers for the five London-based Saudi and Egyptian journalists walked out in protest of what they claimed was an attempt by the court to rush hearings.

Al-Sharq Al-Awsat also decided to close down its Cairo offices where more than 100 Egyptians work for the newspaper and 12 sister publications.

The drama unfolded in May when *Al-*

Sharq Al-Awsat ran a full-page advertisement to promote its sister publication, *Al-Jadida* magazine, declaring that its first issue included an article which exposed how Mubarak's sons used their father's position to make lucrative business deals.

On the following day, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* published a retraction as well as an apology to Mubarak's sons for the "false allegations" made a day earlier and announced that the magazine's appearance would be delayed for 24 hours.

A new edition of the magazine appeared a day behind schedule without the article on the Mubaraks' alleged business deals.

Alaa and Gamal Mubarak rejected the newspaper's apology and insisted on going to court on the grounds that an apology cannot make up for the damage done to their reputation. They sued the Saudi publishers of *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*, Hesham and Mohamed Ali Hafez; the Saudi editor-in-chief of *Al-Jadida*, Othman Al-Onayyer; and two senior London-based Egyptian editors, Fawziya Salama and Gamal Ismail, who worked for *Al-Jadida*. The only defendant present throughout the trial was *Al-Wafd* reporter, Sayed Abdel-Azi, who freelanced for *Al-Jadida* and contributed the article on Mubarak's sons. Both Salama and Ismail were fired from *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* after the

paper's management claimed that they were responsible for running the advertisement and the article.

Judge Mustafa Gawish, after handing down the sentences, told reporters that he gave five defendants the maximum penalty because the prosecutor managed to prove that they intentionally published false information and that they were all involved in approving the publication of the advertisement and the article.

The judge added that he passed a lighter sentence against the *Al-Wafd* journalist because he proved that his article was altered by the London-based editors to make it more sensational.

"After reviewing all the related laws and amendments, the court found that the maximum penalty is one year and the minimum is six months. According to the same laws, imprisonment is a must for all defendants," the judge told dozens of reporters who filled his room after the sentences were announced.

Since hearings opened in July, the lawyers of the five London-based Saudi and Egyptian journalists have insisted that the court had no jurisdiction to hear the case and argued that the trial should be held in London, where their clients live and the newspaper is based, rather than in Egypt.

Abdel-Azi's lawyers, meanwhile, tried to distance him from the other defendants, filing a separate lawsuit against the five, claiming that their client's interests were damaged by the alterations introduced to his article.

Judge Gawish rejected the argument that the case should be heard in London on the grounds the article was written by a Cairo-based reporter and that *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* and its sister publications are circulated all over the country. He also rejected the lawsuit filed by Abdel-Azi against *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat*.

Abdel-Azi's lawyer, Sayed Abu Zeid, told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that the sentence passed against his client was "very harsh." He promised to file an appeal with a higher court.

Before the sentences were handed down, *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* said that it had no intention to contest the verdict. But a lawyer for the group, Mohamed Asfour, later affirmed that he would file an appeal.

The conservative *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* uses sophisticated satellite technology that allows it to be printed in several countries at the same time and has its special site on the Internet. Such facts, according to the prosecutor, added to the damage caused to Alaa and Gamal Mubarak.

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Forging a Cairo-Moscow partnership

Egypt and Russia are working to forge a new partnership, says Viktor Chernomyrdin. The Russian prime minister spoke to Abdel-Malek Khalil in an exclusive interview in Moscow



Russian Prime Minister Chernomyrdin

President Hosni Mubarak's visit to Moscow will take Egyptian-Russian relations to a higher level of partnership and cooperation, including cooperation between the private sectors of the two countries, says Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin. In an exclusive interview which is published concurrently in both the *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Chernomyrdin said the two countries were laying down the "contractual foundations" of a new relationship, now that their ideological differences have been removed with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The interview with Chernomyrdin, 59, was the first granted to an Egyptian newspaper by such a high Russian official for 30 years. Chernomyrdin, an oil expert who became Prime Minister in 1993, is likely to be a candidate for the presidency once President Boris Yeltsin's term expires in the year 2000.

Chernomyrdin stressed that Egypt and Russia are approaching "a highly important landmark because we are about to complete the laying down of new contractual foundations for our joint cooperation. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, reformulating our bilateral relations became imperative," he explained.

Mubarak's talks with Yeltsin, during the upcoming visit, "will take our re-

lations to a higher level of partnership," Chernomyrdin stated, adding that agreements on scientific and technological cooperation, shipping, the prevention of dual taxation and the protection of investments will be signed.

Chernomyrdin pointed at the "glorious traditions of our joint friendship," recalling that Soviet experts provided assistance to Egypt in building such mega-projects as the Aswan High Dam and the Helwan iron and steel complex. "But our relations now are different from those at the time of the Soviet Union," he said, and went on to add: "New and promising trends for cooperation have emerged, including cooperation between the private

sectors in the two countries. Our cooperation has become easier and wider following the disappearance of ideological differences."

Chernomyrdin underlined the necessity of "enriching our cooperation with a new content, primarily related to cooperation between (private) organisations and entrepreneurs, which is bound to add to the vitality of our relations. In this context, we attach special importance to establishing a commercial-industrial chamber."

Chernomyrdin cited a plan by Egyptian industrialist Ibrahim Kamel to equip Russian Tu-204 planes with British Rolls Royce engines, thus combining the

best of Russian and Western technologies. The scheme will provide hundreds of Tupolev workers with work opportunities and new expertise. The new plane is expected to be highly competitive because its price, of \$38 million, is said to be 40 per cent lower than its Western-made competitors.

Chernomyrdin was effusive in praising Egypt's efforts to promote a comprehensive peace in the Middle East to which, he said, Russia remains firmly committed. "We highly esteem the Egyptian effort," he said. "Egypt spearheads the search for appropriate solutions to the Arab-Israeli dispute. We see how active, useful and effective is

the role played by our Egyptian friends, particularly in the Palestinian-Israeli direction. We are ready to continue our cooperation and strengthen our efforts, with the aim of warding off any retreat from a peace settlement. Our joint efforts run in the same direction. We firmly stand against any deviation by the Israeli leadership from the form and principles of the Madrid conference, the Oslo agreements and the principle of trading land for peace. Russia, as a sponsor of the peace process, maintains contacts with all the concerned parties and takes the appropriate positions to correct the situation and revive negotiations on all tracks."

Asked about the prospects of a visit to Egypt, Chernomyrdin responded: "It has been, and it remains, my dream to see the famous features of Ancient Egyptian civilisation and also to get to know Egyptians, their traditions and culture, better. Also, I have heard about the great successes of our Egyptian friends in reforming the Egyptian economy. I am eager to learn about these successes at close range."

In addition to the economic partnership between Russia and Egypt, Chernomyrdin spoke of a "strategic partnership" which he defined as "active and deeper cooperation on the international scene with the aim of promoting peace, abstaining from the use of force or the threat of using force, and opposing all types of extremism." The features of joint action in this connection, he said, were defined at the Sharm El-Sheikh Peacemakers Summit of March 1996 which gathered Mubarak and Yeltsin together with other world leaders, including US President Bill Clinton.

"I am confident that the success of our political cooperation will be useful in improving the situation in the Middle Eastern region and throughout the whole world," Chernomyrdin said and concluded by calling for "mutual enrichment and interaction between the great Russian and Arab cultures."

World MPs demand universal democracy

Parliamentarians from around the world have met in Cairo and issued a declaration urging democracy. Gamal Essam El-Din followed the debates



Sorour congratulates Martinez for being elected as IPU chairman

Two principal issues — democracy and employment — dominated the agenda of the 98th conference of the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) which brought together about 1,600 parliamentarians from 138 countries to Cairo this week. The five-day conference ended on Tuesday with a "universal declaration on democracy."

The declaration upholds the fundamentals of democracy and human rights, including the right of women to participate in decision-making. It underlines the importance of setting in motion the principles embodied in an IPU declaration adopted in Paris on 26 March 1994 concerning the criteria for fair and free elections. These include the right of every citizen to vote and run for election on a non-discriminatory basis and the need to maintain transparency throughout the election process.

The declaration calls for increased interaction between parliaments and the public and urges political parties and interest groups to encourage such interaction. "Democracy should be a constant element of daily life. It is not a mere expression of the will of the electorate but... the epitomisation of the rule of the law," the declaration says.

Employment was the second topic on the IPU agenda. The conference underscored the principles formulated by the International Labour Organisation concerning fundamental labour rights. It urged speedy measures to protect the labour force in developing countries from the negative effects of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the transition to market economies.

On its final day, the conference elected as IPU chairman Miguel Angel Martinez, a 57-year-old Spaniard who has served since 1996 as vice-president of the governing board of the Spanish group in IPU. Martinez replaced Ahmed Fathi Sorour, speaker of Egypt's People's Assembly, whose three-year, non-renewable term expired last Monday.

Martinez won 127 votes of a total of 220 against 43 for Eduardo Menem, president of the Argentine Senate, and 88 for Purno Agiotok Sangma, speaker of the Lower House of the People of India. Menem withdrew following a first round of voting in which Martinez got 99 against 82 for Sangma. A candidate has to get 113 votes to be eligible for the post.

The IPU's Arab group supported Sangma on the grounds that parliamentarians from Africa and Asia were elected only five times for the presidency of IPU, compared to 15 times for parliamentarians from Europe and

Latin America. Egypt has submitted a proposal on the necessity of rotating the presidency among IPU's geographical groups on a periodical basis.

Contrary to expectations, the IPU's Arab group failed to secure the Palestinian National Council (PNC) full membership of IPU. The PNC gained provisional membership during an IPU conference held in South Korea last April. Zohair Handouta, a PNC member, vowed that the Palestinians will continue their efforts to gain full membership at the next IPU conference, due to be held in April in Namibia. The IPU admitted Fiji and restored the membership of Belarus.

The Middle East peace process was also discussed at the IPU Conference. President Hosni Mubarak, addressing the opening ceremony last Thursday, called for "decisive and crucial stances" and "tangible acts and deeds" for achieving peace in the Middle East, not just "flowery words and promises." Mubarak also called on the world's parliamentarians to ensure that the new world order takes into consideration the needs of all peoples and cultures. "Each of us is required to effectively and positively share in formulating this new system of basic principles, values and rules. No group should assume this task alone, irrespective of its good intentions, power, or degree of progress and potentials."

Foreign Minister Amr Moussa, in an address to the conference, strongly criticised the policies of the current Israeli government, accusing it of disregarding "all the principles upon which the peace process in the Middle East is based." Egypt, he said, repeatedly warned that these policies will fan the flames of extremism in the region.

Israeli policies were also severely criticised by members of at least 30 parlia-

ments. Dan Tichon, head of Israel's three-member delegation, had to appeal to delegates "not to isolate Israel at the conference."

Speaker Sorour has rejected an Israeli invitation for a group of Egyptian parliamentarians to visit the Israeli Knesset. Sorour emphasised that the visit is conditional on the full implementation by Israel of the Oslo agreements. Sorour also rejected an attempt by the Israeli delegation to put the issue of the convicted Israeli spy Azzam Azzam on the conference's human rights agenda. The Israeli delegation walked out of the session to protest a speech by Egyptian parliamentarian Yassin Seraggeddin, who appealed for action against the "massacres" perpetrated by the Israelis in Lebanon and Jerusalem and their killing of Egyptian war prisoners during previous wars.

The confrontation between Israel and the Arab delegations reached its peak during a vote on the third main topic of discussion on the conference's agenda. Arab parliamentarians supported a Lebanese proposal calling for "the withdrawal of Israeli forces from southern Lebanon."

Israel's Dan Tichon objected, claiming that Israel had tried unsuccessfully to find a way for the Lebanese to take effective control of their own country. Unless this happens, he said, Israel had "a right to defend its own territory."

Sexual abuse of children, a theme suggested by Australian parliamentarians, defeated the Lebanese proposal to become the third topic on the conference's agenda.

Inner-Arab disputes were not absent from the conference. At least three verbal exchanges broke out between the Kuwaiti and Iraqi representatives. Ahmed Al-Saadoun, speaker of the Ku-

waiti National Assembly, complained about the continued detention of a large number of Kuwaiti nationals in Iraq. Iraq's Ghassan Aziz Khadouri said Iraq will never succumb to Kuwaiti "black-mail."

The Arab group was unanimous in criticising the US Congress for declining to attend the IPU conference. Tojan Al-Faisal, a Jordanian parlia-

mentarian, pointed out that the US Congress wants to halt its \$1 million contribution to the IPU's budget and amend the dates of IPU gatherings to coincide with the Congress' summer recess.

Several Egyptian opposition parties, human rights groups and intellectuals submitted to IPU's Human Rights Committee a memorandum alleging "widespread rigging of Egyptian parliamentary

elections during November and December, 1995."

The memorandum claims that the Egyptian parliament has rejected more than 200 court rulings invalidating the membership of 152 deputies. Speaker Sorour responded by saying that the IPU is solely interested in cases where parliamentarians are unable to perform their legislative duties due to interference by the executive branches.

Sorour revealed that IPU received 78 complaints from parliamentarians alleging that their governments arrested or tortured them to prevent them from speaking their mind in parliament. The Arab complaints came primarily from Sudan and Palestine.

Egyptian parliamentarian Yassin Seraggeddin told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that the IPU conference proved to the world that Egypt is free from terrorism. But Seraggeddin was less upbeat about the effectiveness of the IPU, which, he said, has no power to back its resolutions, least of all concerning democracy. "If anything, the IPU provides an obvious and tragic evidence that parliaments have the right to talk but no power to translate their words into deeds," said Seraggeddin.

Cairo Airport Authority Commercial and Economic Sector

The Cairo Airport Authority (CAA) announces the wish to utilise and construct on approximately 50 acres of land adjacent to the right of the Airport bridge in front of the Sheraton housing project, according to the master plan.

Interested eligible bidders may submit the following:

- 1- The aims of the project and the schedule of execution.
 - 2- The general planning of the site.
 - 3- Preliminary sketches of the components of the project.
 - 4- Demonstration of commercial, touristic and recreational projects that harmonise with the nature of the territory and the programme of execution.
 - 5- The accepted bidder will be treated according to Law 3/1997 and the laws regulating the work of the CAA.
 - 6- Interested eligible bidders may obtain a copy of the terms of proposal from the Commercial and Economic Sector of the CAA against payment of LE5,000.
- The bidder must submit the following documents:
- a- The legal form of the bidder.
 - b- A bank certificate showing the financial potential and the general budget of the last two years.
 - c- Previous experience of the bidder.
 - d- A preliminary feasibility study of the project at the expense of bidder and without any responsibility on the CAA.
- 8- The proposals will be submitted to the Commercial and Economic Sector of the CAA, not later than 3 months from the publishing date.
 - 9- Qualifying bidders invited to attend the bid must pay LE500,000 (five hundred thousand Egyptian pounds) as a bid bond.
 - 10- Further information about the site map can be obtained from the Economic and Commercial Sector of the CAA.

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Book ban revoked

Intellectuals breathed a sigh of relief after a Cairo court decided to repeal the confiscation of a book which Al-Azhar considered insulting to Islam. Amira Howeldy reports

Publishers of Sayed El-Qemni's book *Rabb Al-Zaman* (The Lord of All Time) are preparing to launch a second edition after a Cairo court decided on Monday to revoke the book's confiscation. Acting on a complaint by Al-Azhar's Islamic Research Academy, state security authorities had removed copies of the book from bookstore shelves a month earlier. The Academy said the book dealt contemptuously with Joseph, the Biblical figure whom Muslims revere as a prophet, and Caliph Othman ibn Affan, a companion of the Prophet Mohamed.

Judge Salem Selim, who revoked the confiscation order, said the book contained "stories about the prophets" as well as "reflections by the author." But he found nothing offensive to Islam or any other religion in it.

"Freedom of expression, within the limits of the law, is guaranteed" by the Constitution, the judge said. "Even assuming that the author erred, there was nothing on his part that deserves punishment. He did not insult religion or show contempt towards it."

El-Qemni responded by saying "I never doubted for one minute that the ruling will be in my favour, despite everyone's pessimism." The court had to take this "historic" decision, he told *Al-Ahram Weekly*, because he did not hold religion in contempt.

"I seize this opportunity to dedicate this great victory in the battle of enlightenment and freedom to my friend, Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid," El-Qemni said.

Abu Zeid, a Cairo University professor now living in self-imposed exile in the Netherlands, was ordered by a Cairo court to divorce his wife in 1995 on the grounds that his writings amounted to apostasy. After the confiscation of El-Qemni's book, many intellectuals feared he would face the same fate as Abu Zeid.

"I was optimistic because I was convinced that if I retracted my beliefs, it could mean that I was wrong," El-Qemni said. "This is why I had the courage to stand up for all my ideas."

Asked if there was a possibility his other books might be confiscated, El-Qemni responded: "This is very likely, but I am a fierce fighter and I promise them that they will be defeated."

Amir Salem, one of El-Qemni's lawyers, described the court's decision as "unprecedented. It refuted all the Academy's accusations and encouraged intellectuals to express themselves freely," Salem said.

El-Qemni, 50, is the author of 10 books. *Rabb El-Zaman* came out last year and sold between 3,000 and 4,000 copies, his publisher told the *Weekly*. By the time police confiscated the book

last month, only 20 copies were on bookstore shelves. But following the court order, publisher Madbouli El-Saghir is preparing to print a second edition.

"The confiscation gave publicity to the book and we have been receiving many orders," said Mohamed El-Sayed, the publisher's manager. "People usually chase after whatever is prohibited. In this sense, El-Qemni was lucky."

The book compiled articles which appeared in various newspapers and magazines in 1992 and 1993. Ironically, no one found those articles offensive to Islam four years ago, but when they appeared in book form, the Academy decided to take action, Salem said.

The Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights (EOHR) had launched a media campaign immediately after the confiscation, accusing Al-Azhar of imposing a "form of unacceptable religious guardianship on the conscience of thinkers, writers and other creators." The EOHR also said it denounced the "increasingly censorious role" played by the Academy.

The Academy was recently reported to have recommended the confiscation of dozens of books, many of which do not deal with religion. But the report was never officially confirmed.

Edited by Wadie Kirolos

Albright's visit ends on a hopeful note

The positive reaction by Arab officials to Madeleine Albright's tour of the region contrasted with the climate of pessimism which prevailed before her visit, writes Nevine Khalil

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright received a warm welcome this week as she arrived in Egypt on the fourth leg of her debut tour of the Middle East.

President Hosni Mubarak, who met with Albright in Alexandria, praised her approach as "encouraging, balanced and gives hope for the peace process to move forward."

Similar notes of praise were struck by Albright's Arab hosts in Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Lebanon. "Something fresh is in the air," said Jordan's King Hussein. "Brave and frank," was how Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdel-Aziz described his talks with the American secretary of state. Even Lebanese officials were encouraged by the secretary's brief and unscheduled visit to Beirut, viewing it as a sign of renewed US interest in Lebanon.

At the start of her tour of the Palestinian self-rule areas and six Middle Eastern countries, Albright's trip, at first, was seen more as an attempt to force Palestinian President Yasser Arafat to crack down on Hamas militants than to revive the stalled peace process. The climate of pessimism was underlined by the fact that the secretary of state's first visit to the region came just a few days after two suicide bombings that killed 20 Israelis in Jerusalem.

Albright's face-saving move came about as a result of her position on

the thorny issue of Israeli settlements and her reiteration of the principle of exchanging land for peace which succeeded, at least temporarily, in restoring some Arab faith in US effectiveness as a peace broker.

In a speech to Israeli students on the second day of her visit to Israel — Albright's first port of call — she dropped what the Israeli media described as a "bombshell", calling upon Israel to declare a "time-out" in its policy of expanding Jewish settlements on grounds that such construction was viewed as provocative by the Palestinians.

Arab leaders who met Albright said their governments were impressed not only by Albright's comments on settlements but also by her public re-affirmation of US policies that have been disregarded by the Clinton administration as of late, such as the land-for-peace principle.

In Syria, which Albright visited briefly for talks with President Hafez Al-Assad, there was a mild tone of optimism sparked by renewed US interest in reviving the talks between Damascus and Israel. Albright will meet Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk Al-Sharaa in New York during the coming UN General Assembly meeting next week for further discussions.

Lebanese officials, while pleased that Albright included Beirut in her tour, were frustrated by the fact that the US secretary did not call upon Is-

rael to withdraw from south Lebanon in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 425.

Egypt's Foreign Minister Amr Moussa said that although hopes for an effective US role were low before Albright's visit, "the secretary of state has shown that there is a new even-handed policy" which goes beyond addressing Israel's security concerns. "The US is reaffirming its position as the sponsor of the peace process," Moussa said. "They are talking to the Palestinians, the Israelis and the Syrians in accordance with the rules of the game. This is important."

Moussa was careful to note, however, that despite the renewed hopes triggered by Albright's visit, the peace process itself remained at its lowest point since the beginning of Arab-Israeli negotiations.

"Some people might say that we are now returning to the beginning [of peace talks]. But what can we do? There is no alternative," Moussa told reporters.

Soon after Albright's stop-over in Alexandria, a flurry of consultations began in earnest among Arab leaders. Arafat arrived in Cairo for talks with President Mubarak and Syria's Al-Assad is expected to arrive in Egypt today.

After his talks with Mubarak on Tuesday, Arafat said that they both believe Albright's tour was "positive... because she stressed the US's

support for the land-for-peace formula and condemned Israel's unilateral actions of building settlements and other actions taken in Jerusalem."

But Albright herself conceded that her tour did not make much progress towards restarting the negotiations. It did, however, indicate that the peace process is not dead.

The US secretary said that "big steps" were still needed. The talks between US, Israeli and Palestinian officials scheduled for next week in Washington should provide an opportunity to explore ways to substantiate the emerging hopes.

"I am not going to pretend that I have accomplished a great deal... The crisis of confidence is very severe, it requires a great deal of work to rebuild the trust," said Albright.

Whatever their praise of Albright's tour, Arab countries remained committed to what they see as an equitable way of conducting peace negotiations with Israel. Arab countries clearly told the US secretary of state that they will not take part in any regional arrangements or meetings with Israel so long as there is no progress in the peace process.

Albright was hoping to convince Arab countries — particularly Washington's close Gulf Arab allies — to attend the fourth Middle East and North Africa Economic Conference (MENA IV), slated for November in Doha, Qatar.

In his joint press conference with Albright, Mubarak did not rule out the possibility of Egypt participating in the Doha meeting if the situation improves in the next two months.

"We still have some time," Mubarak said in reference to MENA IV. "If there is progress in the peace process, this will help the conference to be held at a higher level."

Albright faced a similar stand during her meeting with the GCC foreign ministers in Abha. Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal told reporters that "the participation of Arab countries in multilateral talks and economic conferences is related to the stands of the Israeli government towards the peace process."

"What is important is not economic conferences that we are invited to or multilateral talks. What is important is to concentrate on the peace process, because other activities are not an alternative," Al-Faisal said.

Qatar announced that it will hold the meeting on time. But diplomatic sources told the *Al-Ahram Weekly* that the possibility of postponing the meeting cannot be discarded. The issue will be subject to further consideration among Arab foreign ministers, who will be in Cairo for an Arab League meeting on Saturday. Arab foreign ministers are also expected to bring up the subject with US officials during the next UN General Assembly meeting.

Israel targets Lebanon's army

As US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright rounded off her tour of the region in Lebanon, renewed clashes brought death once more to the south of the country. Zeina Khodr reports from Beirut

Blood flowed freely in south Lebanon last weekend as Israeli ground and air forces pounded a Lebanese army position in the front-line village of Araab Saleem, killing six Lebanese soldiers, including an officer and a civilian woman. But the weekend's total death toll came to 12, as other incidents of violence claimed the lives of six other people.

For Israel, this was the country's first deliberate attack on a Lebanese army post. But even this bit of macabre trivia was overshadowed by the timing of the attack, which coincided with US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's tour of the region. Albright's tour aimed at reviving the stalled Arab-Israeli peace negotiations.

The attack, however, was the latest in a spate of killings and other violence that have struck hard at the people of this ravaged area in Lebanon. Hours before Israeli troops stormed the Lebanese army's post, Hadi Nasrallah, the eldest son of Hizbollah's Secretary-General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, was killed along with another resistance fighter in clashes with Israeli soldiers. A third Hizbollah fighter is also still missing.

Hadi's body was retrieved by Israeli troops, fueling speculations that his corpse will be used as a bargaining chip in exchange for the remains of an Israeli soldier killed in the Ansariyeh battle.

Before Hadi's death, the International Red Cross had been negotiating a swap between Israel and Lebanon in which the body of an Israeli commando, captured during the fighting in Ansariyeh, would be returned in exchange for the release of Lebanese detainees in Israeli prisons.

Hizbollah has ruled out the possibility of a body swap benefiting Israel.

The Iranian-backed Hizbollah responded to Hadi's death by setting off a roadside bomb in south Lebanon,

killing two Israeli soldiers.

But the assault on the Lebanese army, has itself prompted a bevy of interpretations.

Lebanese Army Chief of Staff General Emile Lahoud called it revenge for the army's participation in the thwarted Israeli commando operation in Ansariyeh earlier this month in which 12 Israeli's were killed.

"The death of our soldiers will motivate us to continue the struggle against occupation," Lahoud said while inspecting the site of the attack. "We rely on our power to defend our legal rights."

Lebanese Foreign Minister Fares Boueiz accused Israel of attacking the army to divert attention from the heavy casualties it suffered in the conflict which he dubbed "Israel's Vietnam".

This year, Israel suffered its heaviest losses in Lebanon, with 33 soldiers killed, including the 12 who died in the Ansariyeh operation outside the occupied zone. Another 73 were also killed when two Israeli helicopters collided on the way to Lebanon.

The resulting death toll has sparked off an internal debate in Israel over the viability of maintaining its occupied zone in southern Lebanon.

As a sign of increasing domestic pressure, Israel's Interior Minister Avigdor Kahalani told Israeli radio that Israel should bomb Beirut, targeting the city's infrastructure and utilities services, whenever resistance fighters attack Israeli troops in the occupied zone in south Lebanon. The goal: to prompt the Lebanese government to rein in Hizbollah guerrillas.

The Israeli daily *Haaretz* also quoted Israeli General David Tsor as saying that Israel suggested that its army and Hizbollah reach an agreement to stop using roadside bombs in south Lebanon. These bombs are among the most effective weapons utilised by the resistance movement.

The suggestion, however, was shot down by Syria and Lebanon during a meeting of the five-nation ceasefire monitoring group. Tsor told the newspaper.

While some Israeli security sources denied that the attack was the beginning of an Israeli policy to drag the Lebanese army into the conflict, an Israeli army spokesman refused to rule out other similar attacks.

"We do not want to hit the army regularly, but we will do so whenever it fires and puts our soldiers in danger," he said.

The Lebanese army does not take part in fighting in the south, but usually fires at Israeli warplanes and helicopters that operate in Lebanese airspace. Its weapons, however, have little impact in the face of the more sophisticated Israeli arms.

Still others interpreted the attack differently. Abdel-Latif Al-Zein, a parliamentary deputy representing the south, told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that the attack was a message to the Lebanese government, and a bid to drive a wedge between Syria and Lebanon. Both countries are currently coordinating peace moves.

"Israeli criminal acts are not unusual," said Al-Zein. "It wants to empty the south of its residents and the army."

Arguing that Israel does not want peace, and that Secretary of State Albright had "surrendered to Israel", Al-Zein stated that "the attack against the army will not deter us from fighting occupation."

"The army's role in aborting Israel's commando raid on Ansariyeh was an obstacle to Israel, and it wants to send a message to the authorities that the



Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah makes his way to a gathering on Sunday with the families of Hizbollah fighters killed during clashes with Israeli soldiers. Pictures of those killed, including his 18-year-old son, Hadi, are hung on the wall behind Nasrallah (photo: AFP)

army must stay out of the conflict."

Hizbollah, despite the losses it has suffered, seems undaunted. In a speech during a rally, attended by thousands, Nasrallah said that the loss of his son was no different than those losses other families of resistance fighters feel.

"I tell the families of the martyrs whose sons' bodies are being held by the enemy, that we are in a partnership," he said in a statement that indicates that the recovery of his son's body is not an immediate priority for the group.

The struggle against Israel, he said, would go on.

Despite the tension, however, efforts were under way to ameliorate the situation. In Beirut, Albright said a com-

prehensive peace is the only way to end the cycle of violence in south Lebanon.

"Israel, Syria and Lebanon have all expressed willingness to resume talks, but are unable to agree upon the basis of negotiations," she said.

Only days before Albright's arrival in Lebanon, Prime Minister Rafik Al-Hariri said Israel, Syria and Lebanon would be able to reach an agreement in three months if Israel announced its willingness to withdraw from occupied south Lebanon.

Albright said she wanted to wrap up her regional tour with a visit to Lebanon in order to affirm that "this tiny Arab country was essential for a comprehensive peace settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict."

Revolutionary Guard leader down but not out

The dismissal of Iran's influential commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, Mohsen Rezaei, might be another sign of moderation in the policies of the Iranian government, writes Hussein Al-Qasbi

When Iran was at war with Iraq throughout most of the 1980s, Maj. Gen. Mohsen Rezaei, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's most trusted aide. He was also Iran's most-feared man.

At the time, Rezaei had over 150,000 zealous militants under his command, ready to obey his orders to either smash through the formidable Iraqi defence lines or crush any domestic resistance to the regime.

Rezaei's lack of formal military training did not stop him from making it to the top as a faithful follower of Khomeini and his Islamic revolutionary ideals. He was soon to become one of the pillars of the Islamic regime.

When Khomeini died in 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's new supreme spiritual leader, kept Rezaei in his powerful post and included him in his close circle of confidence. Rezaei's position was entrenched among Iran's powerful radicals, the elite ideologues who had ruled Iran with iron will for nearly 18 years.

But last week Khamenei suddenly relieved Rezaei from his influential post and made him a member of the Expediency Council, one of several institutions in Iran which advises and watches the government. This was no promotion for a man who for nearly two decades controlled the country's most powerful paramilitary force. Rezaei's successor has not yet been named.

Iranian media gave no reason for the move, presenting it instead as a routine change. A few days later, Rezaei claimed that he resigned voluntarily because he felt that his mission as Guards commander had been accomplished. But it is easier to believe that he was forced to resign following the inauguration last month of Mohamed Khatami as Iran's new president. Rezaei was among the hard-line leaders who opposed the moderate Khatami and supported his conservative rival, speaker of the Parliament Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri.

It is not yet clear if the replacement of Rezaei was due to direct pressure from Khatami himself, or if Khamenei initiated the move to avoid friction between a moderate president and a hard-line top aide.

Khatami, a peaceful reformer, won the latest presidential elections in May by a 70 per cent majority on a platform of respect for human and civic rights at home and improved relations abroad. His record of moderation signalled the Iranians' hunger for a genuine change and was widely interpreted as a rebuke to conservative Ayatollahs.

Khatami promised his people political reform, social openness and justice. His political and cultural message raised the expectations of the majority of Iranians, especially the youth.

The question now is, how much change Khatami will be able to introduce. A significant part of Iranian political power still rests in Khamenei's hands. The conservative, anti-Western supreme spiritual leader still has the final say in Iran's foreign policy and military affairs.

It is too early to assess the full implications of the change in the Revolutionary Guards' hierarchy. More evidence is needed to show that Iran under Khatami is changing 18 years after the Islamic revolution.

For many Iranians, the absence of hard-line officials like Rezaei from key government and military posts represents a victory for the principles which have been championed by Khatami. Many Iranians, however, still fear a backlash from the traditionalists that could undermine Khatami's efforts to open up Iranian society.

Iranians still remember the reactionaries who, in 1992, forced Khatami out of office following 11 years as culture minister during which he encouraged literature and cinema they considered too permissive.

Rezaei's intention to remain active in politics could be an indication that the hardliners in the religious establishment, and those who still control the parliament and the Guards, are not going to go quietly into the night. For example, Rezaei can use his new position as the secretary-general of the Expediency Council to undermine the presidential reform schemes. In a recent interview, Rezaei made it clear that his priority will be to ensure that "the leader's [Khamenei's] decisions and guidelines are fully implemented."

Reports from Iran suggest that Rezaei might be planning to stand in the next presidential elections scheduled for 2001. If so, he better be prepared for a long and daunting battle in an Iran likely to be different from the one that we know today.

King impatient with Hamas

The detention of Ibrahim Ghosheh, Hamas spokesman in Jordan, was a clear message to the Islamist opposition of what the authorities are capable of doing even to old allies. Lola Keilani reports from Amman

The massive support Jordan's Islamist movement gives Hamas, the Palestinian militant group, has never been a secret. Jordan's largest Islamist group, the Muslim Brotherhood, its political wing, the Islamic Action Front (IAF), and the Islamic parliamentary bloc have always patronised and subsidised Hamas financially, morally and politically.

The now detained Hamas spokesman, Ibrahim Ghosheh, used to hold his press briefings in the Islamist parliamentarians' offices because they enjoy legal immunity. Hamas members were also allowed free movement and the right to organise public rallies in which their views opposing the peace process were aired and cheered.

According to political analysts, the government's decision to arrest and detain Ghosheh, last week, has forced a dialogue within the inner circles of the Muslim Brotherhood on the negative consequences of their decision to boycott the upcoming parliamentary elections and the heavy price they have to pay when they distance themselves from royal grace. The boycott had been advocated by the ideological hawk of the Islamist movement in Jordan, including Ghosheh himself.

The Islamists, by voting themselves out, lost the podium through which they used to intercede with the authorities regarding the detention of Hamas members, to solicit mediation and ask for urgently needed political favours. Such a link with the palace resulted in the king mediating with Washington to insure the release of Hamas leader Musa Abu Marzuq from US jails.

"With their decision to boycott [parliamentary elections] they have no more influence," said Shaker Jouhari, a political analyst.

Ghosheh, one of the founders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, has been one of the intellectual and historical ideologists of the Jordanian Islamist movement even though he disconnected himself from its administrative and organisational apparatus.

The Islamist movement attributed Ghosheh's detention to the visit of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to the region. Jamil Abu Bakr, spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood's political bureau, said that the detention was an arbitrary measure by the Jordanian authorities and an act of accommodation to Israeli demands. "The detention is a result of US pressures and manipu-

lation. Washington would like the Arab regimes to shoulder all the responsibility for the security of Israel in the region. It is pushing Arab regimes to protect the enemy that is mounting aggressive measures," he said.

Mohamed Nazal, another prominent representative of Hamas in Jordan, rejected the official pretext of protection of national security for detaining Ghosheh. He said that it was obvious that the detention was due to political reasons associated with the visit of Albright.

As for the government, it announced that the detention was due to activities undertaken by Ghosheh that threatened the national interest. Minister of State for Information Samir Mutawi stated that Ghosheh was arrested for a statement he made earlier this week in which he said that his group would continue the armed struggle as long as "there are Palestinian prisoners inside Israel." The minister explained that "Ghosheh had been arrested in relation to statements he made which go beyond the bounds and commitment of the Jordanian law, under which he has been given permission to stay in Jordan."

The official statement was ridiculed by Islamist

groups who asserted that there is no such thing as a permission to stay since Ghosheh, originally a Palestinian, has been a full-fledged Jordanian citizen since 1948.

Abdel-Majid Zuniybat, the Muslim Brotherhood's Supreme Guide, rejected the Jordanian government's argument and lodged a complaint with Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour. Zuniybat condemned Mutawi's statements and described them as "dangerous". He warned that the comments made by the Jordanian minister reflected negatively on the fabric of Jordanian-Palestinian nationality.

Zuniybat was critically sarcastic when he raised the question of whether a Palestinian carrying a Jordanian citizenship in Jordan only has temporary residency. Zuniybat also conceded in statements earlier this week that his efforts to mediate the release of Ghosheh have failed.

An official Jordanian source denied that either the Palestinian Authority or Israel had any role in the incarceration of Ghosheh. He said that the kingdom is "a sovereign state which does not act under foreign pressure."

During an interview with Reuters' television ser-

vice on 6 September, Ghosheh had said that "each action has its reaction. When the pressure on the Palestinian people is very strong, then you will find that the reaction is very strong." Referring to the latest suicide bombings in Jerusalem in which 20 Israelis were killed, Ghosheh said that unless Palestinian prisoners in Israel were released "all signs are towards more struggle and more resistance."

Jordanian Deputy Prime Minister Ensour told the General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood that Ghosheh's statement revealed that he had known about the Jerusalem bombing in advance. "Mr Ghosheh is only responsible as a media spokesman for Hamas," said Zuniybat.

The detention of the Hamas spokesman in Amman is indicative of the deteriorating relationship between King Hussein and the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood has been the king's staunch supporter for the last 40 years against many political enemies including Nasserists, Baathists, leftists and even Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Edited by Khaled Dawoud

مركز العمل



(photo: AFP)

Bowing to 'Mother'

India and the entire world joined in mourning the death of Mother Teresa, whose life epitomised love in action. The funeral India accorded her was an unprecedented state send-off usually accorded Indian heads of state and national heroes. **Mariz Tadros** retraces the steps of her vocation

Never in the history of India was a dignitary of non-Indian origin accorded a state funeral until last Saturday when India paid homage to a tiny 87-year-old Albanian nun with full military honours. To the thousands of poor and unfortunate to whom she devoted almost half a century of care, compassion and dedication, she was simply known as "Mother".

"Today the Indian nation has bowed to Mother Teresa. She was the greatest personality in India and we are proud that she came to Calcutta and set up her work of charity there," said a spokesman for Inder Kumar Gujral, India's prime minister.

A day of mourning was announced, flags were lowered to half-mast nationwide and at the funeral her body was laid on the same gun carriage that was used for the funerals of Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi and India's first prime minister, Nehru.

Premier Gujral not only described Mother Teresa as a saint but acknowledged her struggle for equity on behalf of the Indian people as no less important than that of Gandhi: "In the first half of the century we had Gandhi to lead us in a mission against poverty, hunger, discrimination. In the latter half of the century, Mother Teresa showed us the path of service as the most beautiful form of worship. We can build a memorial for her if we pledge to remove poverty, hunger and human misery and continue Mother's work," said the prime minister.

Representatives from 23 countries joined almost two million mourners in paying their respects to Mother Teresa. "Never before have so many world lead-

ers come to Calcutta at the same time," said city mayor Prashanta Chatterjee. The list of VIPs at the funeral bears witness to his words. Attending were Hillary Clinton, the United States' First Lady, India's President K R Narayanan and Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral, the Duchess of Kent, the President of Italy, the Queen of Spain, the Queen of Jordan and the President of Ghana, to name but a few.

Mother Teresa was born Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu in Skopje in 1904. In 1929, at the age of 25, she arrived in Calcutta as a missionary nun with the Sisters of Loreto. The next twenty years she spent teaching history and geography until she got what she termed "a call within a call": "I was to leave the convent and help the poor while living among them."

In a simple white and blue sari and leather sandals, Mother Teresa sought to offer "whole-hearted free service to the poorest of the poor".

She had no "poverty-alleviation strategy, nor the reports and research papers of development experts". She did not seek funds to set up headquarters in a glossy building. She was simply to live like one of the poor, not out of a masochistic, or puritanical notion of self-mortification, but so that "when they complain about the food, we can say: 'We eat the same.' And if they say, 'It was so hot last night, we could not sleep.' We can reply: 'We also felt very hot.' Sometimes they only have one bucket of water. It is the same with us. The poor have to stand in line, we do too. We have been called to give until it hurts," she explained, nonetheless stressing the necessity of serving with joy. "A cheerful giver is a

great giver," was her motto.

Working in Calcutta where the majority of the city's population of 14 million lives in abject poverty, Mother Teresa sought to assist the most marginalised by setting up mobile health clinics, soup kitchens, schools, homes for the orphans and the sick, homes for the dying and rehabilitation centres for lepers.

Some critics condemned her work as futile because she and the Missionaries of Charity concentrated on soothing the distressing symptoms of social injustice without confronting the dynamics that lie at the root of poverty and destitution.

Yet how many lives were to be lost while the powers-that-be and the super-powers were engaged in finger-pointing? Others said the huge amount of money spent on charity was a waste. The poor were not encouraged to take responsibility for their lives nor were they made accountable for the free services they received. At a seminary in Bangalore, Mother Teresa responded to these accusations by saying: "There are many congregations who spoil the poor. It is good to have one organisation in the name of the poor to spoil the poor."

Under the leadership of Mother Teresa, the Missionaries of Charity in India opened their doors to people who were likely to be ignored, neglected or avoided by many NGOs who find that the great majority of the poorest cannot be "reformed" because they are too old, too sick or too disadvantaged to fit into the menu of "sustainable development programmes".

Mother Teresa's vision was to render back to each person his or her sense of worthiness and human dignity. "I prefer our Sisters to make mistakes through

kindness than to work miracles through hardness and unkindness," she once said.

With that, she won the heart of the Indian nation, even though she was a stout Roman Catholic in a majority Hindu population. She repeatedly stressed that service should be irrespective of "caste, creed or nationality". Attending her funeral were religious leaders from many different religious denominations.

Yet to Mother Teresa the poorest of the poor were not just the citizens of the developing world, they were also "the unloved, the abandoned, the outcasts, all those who are a burden to human society, who have lost all hope and faith in life."

In 1971, Mother Teresa's order opened its first home in the United States for victims of AIDS; centres for drug addicts, the homeless and the hungry soon followed.

Mother Teresa rose to international fame in 1979 when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize "for work undertaken in the struggle to overcome poverty and distress in the world, which also constitute a threat to peace". By 1992 her order was stationed in 450 sites in more than 90 countries.

Now that Mother Teresa has gone, many wonder whether her successor, Sister Nirmala, will be able to lead the order which revolved so much around Mother Teresa's personal qualities. Sister Nirmala, however, is confident about the future. "The Missionaries of Charity is dependent on divine providence. God will provide whatever we need," she said at a recent news conference.

Hearts and spades

Is poverty a necessary part of the human condition? It should not be. Yet it will be, as long as charity replaces social security benefits, argues **Gamal Nkrumah**

For almost half a century, Mother Teresa made her home in Calcutta, where she shared the lives of the poor whom she sought to help. By the time of her death last week, the order she had established counted some 4,000 nuns, who together run 517 centres around the world — orphanages, homes for the destitute, and AIDS hospices. She chose to be part of a worldwide institution, just as she chose poverty, carving out her own small niche within the gigantic edifice of the Roman Catholic Church. It was the church's backing that gave her the leverage she needed if her work was to have an impact that was not only personally, but also statistically significant.

A living saint for many Christians, Mother Teresa was no one culture's property. She was loved by many millions of people of different religions throughout the world for her steadfast devotion to the cause of the underdog. She was respected for the values that she represented. Her death coming less than a week after that of Diana, Princess of Wales, comparisons were inevitable between these two high-profile champions of the marginal and the dispossessed. Yet beyond any obvious contrasts in their lifestyles and public images, what is most striking about this coincidence is how both these figures demonstrate that charity and concern for others have now become emphatically a private industry, not a public service.

Mother Teresa, in the words of Pope John Paul, fought on behalf of those who had been "defeated by life, and [who through her works were made to] feel the tenderness of God." But the down-trodden did not always have to rely upon Albanian nuns and divorced princesses to defend their cause. Taking care of the poor was once the preserve of government departments and ministries. Inevitably, as formal support structures have fallen away, so the problems they helped to alleviate have deepened. Yet faced with a crisis of unprecedented dimensions, political initiatives and investments in human capital and institutional capabilities are rarer than ever before.

The elected representatives of countries around the world who have been badgering welfare recipients, slashing subsidies on basic foodstuffs and cutting social security benefits were falling over each other last week to pay tribute to Mother Teresa in Calcutta, just as the first ladies of many nations that export land mines to authoritarian regimes were only too happy to be photographed in black filing into Westminster Abbey.

In America, for instance, concerted attempts by Republicans to win the big battle over tax cuts have borne sour fruit. At a time when the American economy is booming, many low-income American families who fall below the tax threshold can no longer claim their full child benefit. New laws designed to drastically reduce benefits for disabled children and the elderly are also taking their toll on the poorest and most needy members of society. The war being waged against welfare recipients in the world's largest economy hits racial minorities, the disabled, diseased and dying hardest.

Yet despite this glaring disparity between politicians' words and their deeds, so far the deaths of Princess Diana and Mother Teresa have failed to provoke any serious international debate on the role charities are compelled to play in an age when cut-backs of all kinds are crippling the poor. One unsympathetic critic has even described the funerals of the two guardian angels of our age as "big circuses charged with plenty of unthinking hysteria."

Is charity a valid response to such hysteria, or merely a way of salving one's conscience? Charity today depends essentially on the goodwill of a limited number of rich individuals. It is no longer the government's business — our business as a society. Governments, both in the rich North and the poor South, are cutting back on welfare programmes. Budget cuts and lower taxes mean that it is the individual who decides where his or her small portion of money is going. If indeed it is going anywhere at all. We are empowered, the experts say, to make our own decisions. Yet for the critics, it is precisely this personal approach to charity that is so worrying.

"It is humiliating to have to accept charity," says Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, the internationally renowned Egyptian political analyst. "No one should be put in a position where he or she has to depend on the benevolence of others. Dependence on charity is not a dignified way to live. Civilised societies must not tolerate the existence of great disparities of income, where a substantial percentage of the population are utterly dependent on the goodwill of others." He added: "The state must play a greater role in ensuring that people live a dignified life. The role of the individual does not rule out a role for the state. No one questions the importance of the work done by individuals who dedicate their lives to charitable work and to alleviating the suffering of mankind."

Yet many refuse to see the problems that such individuals' power can cause, when cosy elites start running private charities and determining who lives and who dies. All this at a time when the numbers of the destitute and needy are higher than ever before: according to the World Bank's estimations, there are today about one billion people in the world who live well below the poverty line.

There is perhaps some superficial sense of justice in seeing the burden of charitable work fall especially on the super-rich among individuals and the wealthiest among nations. Few Third World countries will refuse charity when it is offered them. Yet economic deregulation, which is the root cause of so much social injustice, continues apace, even as the local elite is writing its thank you letters.

And who would disown a saint? Mother Teresa was buried on Saturday with the full honours of the state. "Indian politicians accorded her an honour usually reserved for presidents and serving prime ministers," Najma Heptulla, deputy chairman of the Rajya Sabha, the Indian Parliament's upper house, told the *Weekly*. Yet they did not do so for nothing. As Heptulla, in Cairo for the international parliamentary conference, pointed out: "She served India well."

Among the predictable chorus of praise for the deceased who is not there to answer back, there have been one or two dissenting voices. Sumanta K Datta-Ray, a columnist in *The Telegraph*, claims that Mother Teresa's mission failed to make any substantial impact on Calcutta's grinding poverty. "Calcutta has little reason to be grateful," he wrote. "It was she who owed a tremendous debt to Calcutta. No other city in the world would tamely offer up its poor and its dying to be stepping stones in a relentless ascent to sainthood."

Once upon a time, no one would have dared question the political correctness of a living saint. Yet today, some are willing to declare openly that Mother Teresa's strategies for dealing with the poor's predicament flew in the face of social realities, and of common humanity. They point out that some 50,000 people have died in her order's "care". Then there was the well-publicised visit to Haiti under Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, where she received an award from one of our centuries' most brutal dictators, praising him — doubtless because of his Roman Catholicism — as a "great benefactor and one who champions and adores the poor." Indeed, her remarks in many contexts were widely regarded as naive, and often dangerously so.

Yet even without these blemishes, wasn't her reputation doomed from the beginning? There have always been those who have hearts and those who do the donkey work. A queen of hearts will always upstage a queen of spades. Diana, too, had her detractors. But there is an apparently universal obsession with princesses who lead fairy-tale lives.

It is left to individuals like Mother Teresa and Princess Diana to gloss over the ugly social ills spawned out by the very successes of today's hard-hearted achievers," says Heikal. But the gloss is thicker when the individual in question shows that it is possible to help the poor without having to suffer with them, that compassion is compatible with wealth and glamour. Even the poor would like to think so. According to the BBC, half of the world's population watched Diana's funeral on television. "Half the world" doubtless includes many of its poorest people, even if they didn't own the television set themselves.

The ayes have it

BRITAIN is not hidebound by cumbersome tradition. Last week, the Scots voted overwhelmingly for the creation of a Scottish parliament with separate legislative powers from Westminster, ushering in a new era of devolution in Britain.

The scale of the yes vote for Scottish devolution made it more than likely that legislation introducing a Scottish parliament with powers to levy taxes would be pushed quickly through the House of Commons.

"What they have done, and what we have done, is we have shown that we can change the way we are governed — that we need not be afraid of change," the British Prime Minister Tony Blair declared soon after the referendum results.

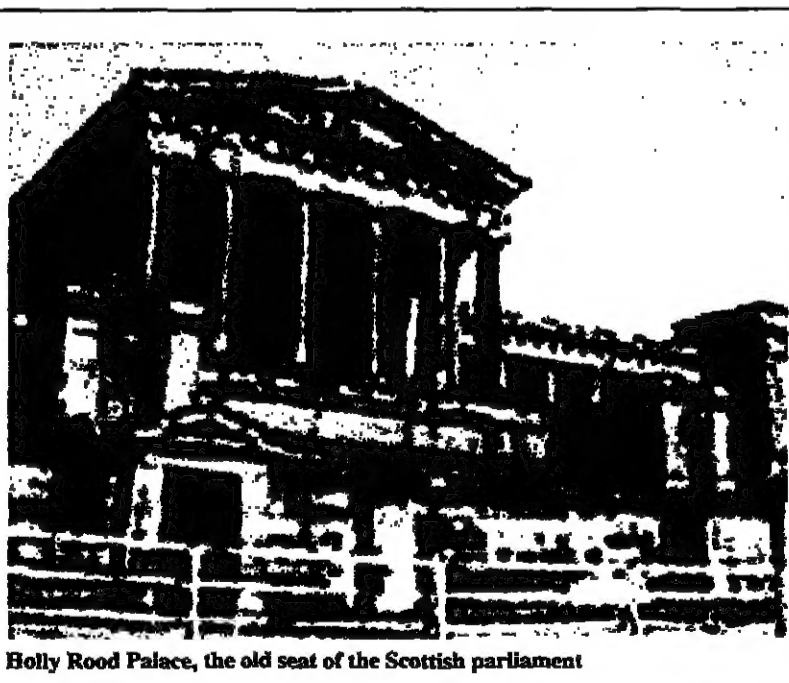
The Scottish Nationalists expressed confidence that far from shoring up the Union between England and Scotland as Blair argued, the referendum

had boosted the Scottish Nationalist long-term aim of Scottish independence.

The mythical Prince Cathelus was supposed to have brought back from Egypt the Old Testament's prophet Jacob's pillow in the form of the Stone of Scone. Over the centuries it remained one of the most revered of Scottish icons. A few months ago, the Scots retrieved it from England.

The first Scottish parliament was founded in 1244 and an independent Scottish parliament ended when the English and Scottish parliaments passed acts of union that formerly united England and Scotland as Great Britain or the United Kingdom.

The seat of the old Scottish Parliament was at Holy Rood Palace, now the official residence of Queen Elizabeth II in Scotland. And deliberations at Holy Rood promise to be as stormy as Northern Ireland's Stormont.



Holy Rood Palace, the old seat of the Scottish parliament

Victims of the veil

With fighting intensifying in central Afghanistan, the United Nations has pulled out of the country, leaving Afghan women to face an uncertain future, writes **Yehya Ghanem** from Kabul

Less than 2.5 per cent of Afghan women were literate at the time of the Soviet invasion of the country in 1979. Today, the figure is probably far lower. The vast majority of Afghanistan's estimated 20 million people are illiterate, especially the rural poor, who make up 90 per cent of the population.

While a few hundred Afghan women work in international humanitarian relief non-governmental organisations based in Kabul, most educated women work as teachers in girls' schools. But at the time of the Taliban takeover in Kabul, there were no more than 3,000 women employed in education.

Most Afghan women work in agriculture, constituting an essential element in the Afghan agricultural workforce. But with the Taliban usurpation of power, any change in the conditions of women agricultural workers is unlikely to happen. While urban and educated women are now forced to stay at

home and give up their jobs, rural and illiterate women will continue working in the fields as labourers, especially with the men and teenage boys being recruited by the militias of the different Afghan warlords.

When the Taliban announced that women would lose their rights to education and employment under their Islamic rule, UNESCO decided to pull out of the country. This decision has given the Taliban free rein to enforce their despotic decrees and has denied the Afghan people the already meagre amount of aid granted by UNESCO — aid it sorely needs.

As a result of the war which has devastated Afghanistan over the past 20 years, the country's infrastructure is in shambles. Health services, in particular, are practically non-existent. Many hospitals were destroyed during the war and most of the qualified medical workers have sought refuge in neighbouring Pa-

kistan or in the West. Water plants were also destroyed and the lack of available potable water has caused a marked increase in life-threatening epidemics like cholera. Infant mortality rates, a reliable indicator of the condition of a nation's health, are among the highest worldwide — with 150 deaths per 1,000 births. Despite the World Health Organisation's (WHO) concerted efforts to improve health conditions, infant mortality rates are currently on the rise.

It is estimated that one million people died during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, while more than 150,000 were killed by the civil war that has been raging since 1989. Moreover, as a direct result of unexploded mine fields — 20 million mines remain scattered around the countryside — about one million people, many of them children, have become physically handicapped, and the numbers are growing.

The country's social fabric has also

been destroyed by the war. More than one million women have been widowed and have no income or means to make a living. A whole generation of young people has come of age with no formal education and no training apart from that related to militia warfare. Consequently, unemployment and a sense of hopelessness have taken their toll, especially among the young, who have turned to, readily available, drugs. Afghanistan is one of the world's major producers of opium and heroin.

Commenting on the West's apparent indifference to the plight of the Afghan people, Sayed Khan, an international aid worker in Kabul, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*: "Conditions are appalling in Afghanistan. The people sacrificed a lot when they fought the battle for the West and won. But when the time came to pay up, the West began to withdraw and now they are using the Taliban headline position on women as a pretext to pull out completely."

Al-Ahram Weekly

No room for hope

If initial pessimism about US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's Mideast tour was abated by her statements that Israel should hold off on settlement construction deemed provocative by Palestinians, Israel was quick to heighten it again.

With Albright's tracks still fresh in the sand following her departure from Israel, Jewish settlers decided too that the US secretary didn't know what she was talking about — and took over Palestinian homes in the totally Arab Jerusalem neighbourhood of Ras Al-Amud.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's response was equally predictable. Alleging that he had not been forewarned, he denounced the move but said it would be difficult to evict the settlers "within the law".

And so the law once again prevails in Israel and Netanyahu again reaffirms his commitment to peace.

But what if the situation were to develop into another major clash between Israelis and Palestinians? What if another suicide bombing were to go off in Jerusalem as a result of this incident? Would Netanyahu not quickly mount the stage and lambast Arafat for jeopardising Israeli security by not reigning in Hamas? The answer is obvious.

What is not so obvious, however, is the rationale behind Netanyahu's oblique approach to peace. In the interests of securing his coalition, he is willing to play dumb and shrug as Jewish settlers occupy a neighbourhood incontestably Arab.

In the wake of Albright's visit, Israel's iron-fisted, blatantly unilateral approach to peace makes the process, and the efforts of all involved in it, look like a farce.

More willing to dole out blame than to shoulder responsibility, Netanyahu has again proven that it is the Jewish extremists who run his administration. Ironically, these are the same accusations he has levelled against Arafat.

Should Egypt attend the Fourth Middle East/North Africa Economic Conference (MENA IV), scheduled to be held in Doha in November? It is a complex and thorny question. The current deadlock in the peace process seems to support the logic of those who advocate a boycott; yet regional and international political and economic considerations make the prospect of a boycott unpalatable.

The Arab position from the outset has been that the bilateral and multilateral tracks of the negotiating process should be closely linked, and that progress in addressing the core issues of the Middle East conflict — primarily the Israeli occupation of Arab land — should meet with comparable progress in the field of regional cooperation. But since the arrival of the right-wing Likud Party to power in Israel, the bilateral track has ground to a halt.

This government has deviated from all accepted norms of civilised international relations. It has refused to abide by agreements ratified by the previous Israeli government and has consistently sought to undermine the principles of the peace process, which were unanimously accepted by all the participants in the Madrid conference. It has actively violated both the letter and spirit of peace by confiscating still more Palestinian land for Jewish settlers, and its belligerence has brought the region back to the boiling point it had reached before Madrid. Should the Arabs be expected to reward Israel for this behaviour by conceding to its demands for normalisation and economic cooperation?

The US administration has stated that it can be no keener for the peace process to succeed than the parties immediately in-

Whether or not the Arabs choose to boycott the next Middle East/North Africa economic summit hinges to a large extent on developments in the peace process, writes **Ibrahim Nafie**



involved. From the Arab perspective, the US, which helped lay the foundations for the agreements concluded so far, is retracting from its professed "impartiality". Once again it is demonstrating its exclusively pro-Israeli bias. It has actively assisted Israel in violating the accords which Washington signed in its capacity as "sponsor" of the peace process. It has backed the Likud government's demands to renegotiate over issues that had already been resolved. It parrots Israel's trumped-up allegations against the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its veto has blocked a UN Security Council resolution reflecting international condemnation of Israel's violations.

Because of this unstinting support for the extremist policies of the current government in Israel, the US has been instrumental in bringing the peace process to its current deadlock. In this perspective, it is only natural to wonder why we should accept the US call to attend MENA IV. Egypt has consistently worked to fa-

cilitate communications between Israel and the Arab countries involved in the bilateral negotiations. Dr Osama El-Baz, President Mubarak's political advisor, has shuttled tirelessly between the various parties in order to hammer out some kind of compromise so that the negotiations can be resumed. It appears, however, that non-Arab parties are intent upon deliberately thwarting Egyptian efforts.

One is struck by the irony of this situation in the context of a conflict that has yet to witness the participation of an impartial individual or institution. Of all the parties involved, Egypt has been the most actively committed to reviving the peace process. In so doing, it has acted in a manner consistent with its pan-Arab interests and, simultaneously, with its perception that the stagnation of the peace process is dangerous.

What course should Egyptian diplomacy take with regard to MENA IV? Much depends on the developments in the bilateral negotiating atmosphere over the coming

months. The actions of the US and Israel during this period will be crucial to Egypt's decision to go to Doha or not. If the US renews serious efforts to revive the bilateral negotiations, and if it pursues initiatives toward this end at high diplomatic levels, it will contribute to alleviating the pressure of the factors currently inducing the Arabs to boycott MENA IV.

It is not sufficient for the US to make a high-level diplomatic showing in Doha. Rather, it must demonstrate its willingness to bring the peace process back on track. Specifically, the US must declare unequivocally its commitment to the original principles of the peace process. It must also demonstrate that it is willing to listen to a variety of opinions — not just the Zionist lobby, which has such an exclusive hold over the American decision-making process as regards the Middle East. For its part, Israel must realise that it cannot persist in its current belligerence. It must take tangible steps to fulfil its commitments under current agreements, demonstrate its willingness to abide by the original principles of the peace process and prepare to resume negotiations with Syria at the point where they broke off.

Finally, it must be stressed that the current resistance to attending MENA IV does not stem from any opposition to the conference itself. Nor is this attitude directed at any specific country. Rather, it reflects Egypt's and the Arabs' commitment to a just, comprehensive and lasting peace. Only by eliminating the core causes of the Arab-Israeli conflict — the issues that must be hammered out in the bilateral negotiations — will it be possible to bring about true stability and cooperation.

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The Diana phenomenon

Mohamed Sid-Ahmed, in London during the week which witnessed the death and funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, comments on an extraordinary event

When the shocking news of Diana's death was announced early on the morning of Sunday 31 August, I happened to be in London where I remained until after her funeral the following Saturday. It was a singular experience, not only because of the unprecedented outpouring of genuine grief the event elicited at the national level, but also because it was the first time ever that what can best be described as class struggle was conducted with bouquets of flowers!

It is hard to explain why the British people identified so strongly with a woman who was, after all, merely the ex-wife of the heir to the throne. Tony Blair dubbed her "the people's princess". However, the Spencer family to which Diana belonged boasts a pedigree that is more ancient than that of Britain's ruling dynasty. In the now famous eulogy he delivered in Westminster Abbey, her brother Earl Spencer underlined the point — and addressed a clear rebuke to her former in-laws for divesting her of the title "Her Royal Highness" after her divorce — when he said that Diana "needed no royal title to continue to generate her particular brand of magic".

Part of her appeal lay in such obvious assets as her beauty, youth, elegance, simplicity, her winning smile and luminous eyes. There was also the massive media exposure which made her a household name not only in Britain but throughout the global village. One of the most celebrated stars of the media age, she also became its most famous victim. There is no doubt that she thrived on all the media attention; in fact, she was said to be quite adept at manipulating the media to serve her own ends. That may well be, but the fact remains that following her divorce she was hounded by the paparazzi beyond endurance. With a candid shot of the Princess guaranteed to fetch a six-figure sum, the paparazzi, or stalkers, as they were derisively referred to, pursued her relentlessly.

The news of her death was all the more shocking in that it came at a time speculation was rife over whether her highly publicised romance with Dodi Fayed would end in marriage.

Although I tend to shy away from conspiracy theories, there is no doubt that the coming together of Diana and Dodi was not entirely a coincidence. In a way, each represented an anti-establishment "institution": Diana, because of her position as the divorced wife of the heir to the British throne and the mother of a future king, whose high-profile involvement in and patronage of many charities and causes greatly boosted her popularity; Dodi Fayed, in his capacity as the son of the Egyptian billionaire Mohamed El-Fayed, whose many applications for British citizenship have been turned down despite his vast holdings, which include Harrods in London, the Ritz in Paris, and the last home of the late Duke and Duchess of Windsor, also in Paris.

Already linked by a friendship and possible business association between their fathers, Diana and Dodi must have been drawn closer together by shared feelings of rejection by the establishment. Still, this in no way implies that they were the victims of a conspiracy to eliminate them, even if their eventual marriage would have been a source of embarrassment for the British ruling establishment.

In fact, to attribute the death of Diana to a conspiracy is to detract from the significance of the extraordinary emotion it provoked throughout Great Britain and the world at large. In a way, the massive outpouring of grief at her death implied a denunciation of the practices that had brought it about. Accusations were first levelled against the paparazzi, whose tireless pursuit of the princess inspired her brother to remark that of "all the ironies about Diana, perhaps the greatest is this: that a girl given the name of the ancient goddess of hunting was, in the end, the most hunted person of the modern age".

It was not long before the royal family itself, including the Queen, came under fire for the silence they initially maintained in the face of the tragedy, remaining secluded in Balmoral while the people mourned. One day before the funeral, the Queen bowed to public pressure and returned to Buckingham Palace. What struck me as I

watched her televised walkabout among the mourners was the look of amazement on her face at the number of bouquets that had been placed before the gates of the palace in tribute to Diana.

In her address to the nation that afternoon, she paid homage to her former daughter-in-law and the next day, waited at the gates of Buckingham Palace, together with all the members of her immediate family, to watch the funeral cortege. To get around the rigid protocol that would normally prevent the Queen from participating in the funeral of her son's divorcee, it was decided that the Spencers would be the chief mourners in the service at Westminster Abbey.

Diana's funeral brought out the best in the British people, who displayed remarkable self-restraint and dignity in the midst of their overwhelming grief. For many, she was a symbol of post-modern Britain — an inspiration for greater unity. Even the two warring factions in Northern Ireland saw eye to eye for the first time when it came to paying tribute to the Princess. Like Tony Blair, who had reportedly offered her the post of a roving ambassador, Diana embodied a new generation of Britons who believe that the traditional legacy of the oldest monarchy in Europe acts as a constraint on Britain's ability to cope with the challenges of a new millennium.

It was Blair who insisted that the funeral should be a popular event in which the people were allowed to express their grief at her passing. Although she was descended from one of the noblest families in the land, Diana's espousal of the causes of marginalised groups such as the homeless, AIDS patients, lepers and land-mine victims earned her the love and admiration of the common people, for whom she came to stand for values not normally associated with Britain's notoriously class-conscious and hierarchical aristocracy.

That is not to say that Diana's death heralds the imminent demise of the monarchy. But what is certain is that it will no longer be royalty as we have known it to date. Diana may not have reigned, but she will be better remembered in history than many who have.

Death and Diana

By Naguib Mahfouz

My feelings for Diana, Princess of Wales, were always neutral. When I heard of her engagement to Prince Charles, I was pleased, as her photographs showed a pretty young girl. I never thought the news of her death would affect me so much, just as it affected the rest of the world.

I realise that one of the reasons for my feelings was that death itself had knocked at the door to say: "Here I am, when you least expected me... Death reminds us of its existence at all times, but it is usually in time of illness, or when we see a funeral procession. Not in this case. Here were two young people in the bloom of life and at the hour of their greatest happiness, the focus of the world's attention. Everyone was wondering when would they get married. Instead, they died in the wreck of their car."

If we were all so affected and so sad, it is because our sorrow for them was sorrow for ourselves. What we had seen was not a car accident, but death itself, which looked at us and said: "Can you take this, too, in your stride? You have grown accustomed to death and walking behind a coffin, and know the suitable words to utter, but remember: death is much much more than that..."

Based on an interview by Mohamed Salmawy.

The Press This Week

Al-Ahram: "We have been inundated by press reports saying that Albright will be bringing with her definite ideas on how to revive the peace process. The press contradicts itself, for it has been saying all along that the US administration is clearly biased to Netanyahu. If so, how can we expect anything of a mediator who sides totally with one side? Albright prefers Netanyahu's 'peace for security' ideas to the Madrid conference's concept of 'land for peace.' Are the Arabs so desperate as to accept a 'waiting for Godot' situation?" (Ismail Sabri Abdallah, 10 September)

Al-Mussawar: "The Cairo summit has ended with a clear vision of the right way to bring about a resumption of talks on all tracks, a vision which contradicts Netanyahu's attempts to bury the Oslo Accords and scrap previous commitments. The difference in view between the Cairo tripartite summit and Netanyahu is so huge that Albright will have to work hard to bridge the gap. What is needed is a clear US insight on how to revive the peace process." (Makram Mohamed Ahmed, 12 September)

Alkhar El-Yom: "The statements made by Albright prior to her departure, upon her arrival and during her subsequent visit to Israel have not been encouraging. These statements must have pleased the Zionist lobby, but they led observers to predict, perhaps a bit too hastily, the failure of the visit. There is a clear Arab lack of confidence in US credibility as a power broker and we hope that Albright will be able to change this perception." (Ibrahim Saada, 13 September)

Al-Ahram Al-Arab: "The [Mubarak-Hussein-Arafat] summit was timely. It underlined Arab commitment to peace and rejection of terrorism. It also put the Israeli government and the US secretary of state in a difficult position. Both are required by world public opinion to state clearly their positions on peace. The parties concerned had gone a long way towards peaceful coexistence until Netanyahu came to power and wasted no time in turning back the clock. The Israeli prime minister revived the climate of fear

Peace and prejudice

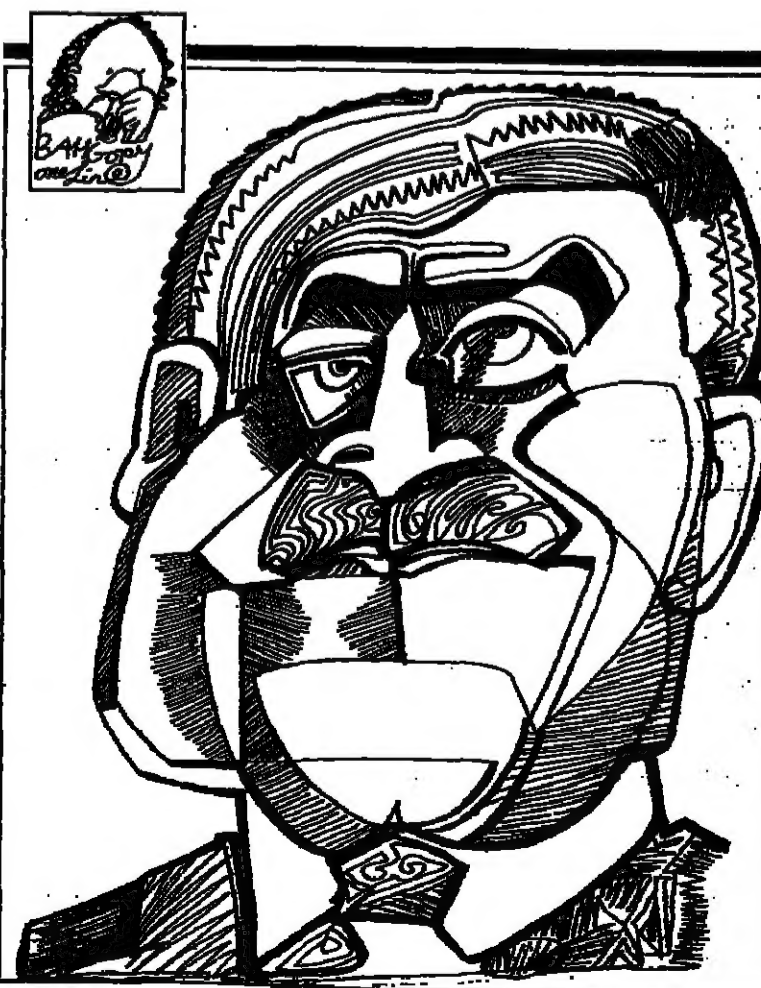
in the region. His policies of hegemony and occupation undermined peace talks with the Palestinians, the Syrians, and the Lebanese." (Osama Saraya, 13 September)

Al-Wakef: "Our worst expectations have come true. Albright's visit to the region has failed because of the US total bias to Israel. The US bias to Israel is only too clear and it will usher a phase of violence in the region... The Arabs are poised to reject the Doha summit. This summit is the real reason for Albright's tour. The US is neither interested in peace or Arab security... Peace cannot be divided. What Israel and the US want is surrender and we are not willing to oblige." (Editorial, 14 September)

Al-Ahram: "The visit of that old woman, Albright, has no rhyme or reason to it, nor will it produce any results. What she announces in Washington is the same as what Netanyahu says in Jerusalem, or is it the other way round? We don't need more of US ideas. We've had enough. What we want is decisive and even-handed action. The US wants to see the region divided and begging for dollars and weapons. It wants to see the Arabs unable to start a new war with Israel." (Anis Mansour, 14 September)

October: "Albright has come to speak of Israel's security and the Palestinian obligations. How about Palestinian security? She is yet to tell us what obligations she wants the Israeli government to honour... The success or failure of the Albright mission does not depend on what she says — there is a lot of talk about peace and the US role but very little action. This is why we don't care what Albright says about the intentions of the US administration. What concerns us is what action she intends to take after this much-vaunted visit. We will wait and see. Then, we will decide if we are optimistic or not and if the Albright mission was a success or failure." (Ragab El-Banna, 14 September)

Compiled by Hala Saqr



The massacres of Algeria are reflected in the face of its president, Amin Zerrouk... I drew his eyes as question marks, while anxiety furrows his brow. His forehead is drawn tight here, in a frown fraught with tension, I pictured him attempting to stay calm as blood and flames rise all around him. At first sight, I thought, he would attempt to present a placid face to the world, as if everything was in place. But the questions remain, riddled with bullet-holes: how will he stop the bloodshed?

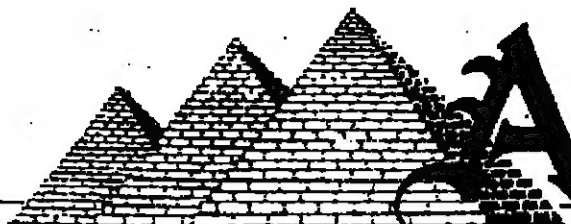


Illustration: Gamil Shafiq

That handshake on the White House lawn: was it a breakthrough, or a bomb? *Al-Ahram Weekly* looks back on four years of hope and horror, and wonders: where do we go from here?

...then and now

Graham Usher describes the mood from Bethlehem

To commemorate the fourth anniversary of the Oslo Accords, a few hundred Palestinians staged a mock funeral at the Deheishah refugee camp in Bethlehem on 13 September. The deceased was an empty coffin bearing the wreath "Oslo". Although small, the demonstration enjoyed the support of all Palestinian factions, including Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement.

The scene was in stark contrast to December 1995, when Deheishah's 8,000 or so inhabitants celebrated the Israeli army's departure from Bethlehem by tearing down the 20-metre high wire fence that ensnared the camp during the seven years of the Palestinian Intifada. At the time, a banner was slung across the main Bethlehem-Hebron road that runs near the camp. It read "Deheishah shall not fall again".

Deheishah has not fallen, as recent protests by refugees against cutbacks in UNRWA services attest. But, four years into Oslo, the dominant mood in Bethlehem and throughout the Occupied Territories is one of utter pessimism. "For most Palestinians, the peace process is dead," says Fatah leader and Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) member for Hebron, Mohamed Hourani. "To speak now of Oslo is meaningless," he added.

This is particularly so in Bethlehem. Since Oslo was signed, the city and its neighbouring villages have seen their lands confiscated by successive Israeli "pro-Oslo" and "anti-Oslo" governments to build by-pass roads for settlers and expand Jewish settlements, of which the ongoing construction of 2,456 housing units for the Har Homa settlement on Jebel Abu Ghneim next door to Bethlehem is only the most notorious example.

Following the Jerusalem suicide bombings of July and September, Bethlehem was also singled out for extended "internal closures" by the Israeli army, preventing all Palestinian movement in and out of the city. Israel justified the blockades on the grounds that explosives found at a Hamas bomb factory in early July in Beit Sahour, a Palestinian village near Bethlehem, may have been used for the Jerusalem blasts and that a Hamas military leader, Mottiedin El-Sharif, was at large in the city. It has yet to produce evidence for ci-

ther claim and the closures have been quietly lifted.

Not that this is much succour to Bethlehem's 60,000 odd residents. As a result of the closures, unemployment soared, reaching 70 per cent in Deheishah. Health care has been crippled due to Palestinians being unable to reach hospitals in Jerusalem and the local economy has tipped into a free fall, with losses to the tourist sector alone estimated at \$500,000 a day.

The cumulative impact of these punishments has produced a growing sentiment in Bethlehem that life was better under the occupation. "Before Oslo, and even in the early years of the Intifada, we could travel everywhere in Israel and move freely between the West Bank and Gaza Strip," says a Palestinian from Deheishah. But "the Oslo agreement has canonised the Palestinian areas and we all need permits to go to Israel and even to Gaza. Is this peace?" he asked.

The answer is no. But neither is it war yet. Although protests flared in Bethlehem after Israel's

decision to build Har Homa and during the closures, most were orchestrated and on a small scale, organised and led by Fatah students from Bethlehem University.

With Oslo collapsing all around them, most Palestinians, in Bethlehem and elsewhere, appear to have become preoccupied less with the national struggle than the basic struggle for economic and social survival. It is a political alienation reflected in Palestinian opinion surveys conducted over the last six months.

The Oslo process has failed to deliver the promised peace and economic development. The Oslo process has failed to deliver the promised peace and economic development. The Oslo process has failed to deliver the promised peace and economic development.

These opinion polls show that "strong support" for Oslo is at an all time low at the 10 per cent mark and that a growing but still minority trend in favour of suicide attacks represents 28 per cent of the respondents. But the most telling finding is the 44 per cent of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza who "no longer feel any affinity to either the PLO factions or the Islamist movement." As for the Palestinian Authority (PA), a colossal 47 per cent believe that corruption is "widespread" in the nascent administration.

This is some reversal from January 1996 when 79 per cent of all eligible Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza turned out to vote for the PLC and elected Yasser Arafat as their president with an 88 per cent majority.

For the PA leadership the Palestinian population's loss of support for the Oslo process is due simply to the "rejectionist" policies of Benjamin Netanyahu. But, in Deheishah, there are many who believe the rot set in after the Islamist suicide operations in March 1996 when, under inordinate Israeli and US pressure, Arafat adopted Israel's security agenda as his own and authorised the arrest without charge of over 1,000 Palestinians in the vain hope of getting Shimon Peres and a Labour government re-elected.

"I worked for the Preventive Security Force for eight months," says one Fatah activist, who during the Intifada spent two years in Israeli prisons for her pains, "but I left. I realised that the PA was not a state, nor was Oslo the dream of independence we fought for. I need a job but I'm not going to become an employee of the Israeli army."

For another Fatah leader, who refused to be named, the root cause of the malaise is less Oslo than a deeper crisis in Palestinian and Arab politics. "The Palestinian leadership cannot declare Oslo dead because to do so would mean having to formulate a new strategy and new national programme," he says.

"We need to change the methods of our struggle if we are to defend our national rights." Is such a change of leadership and strategy anywhere on the horizon? "It will be a long process," he says.

Forever open-ended

Dina Ezzat asks four of the participants in the Oslo secret channel what they think of the DOP today

"The Declaration of Principles (DOP) was a prescription on how to reach an agreement," said Mona Juul, the Middle East coordinator in the Norwegian Foreign Ministry and one of the main facilitators of the deal. According to Juul, the interim agreements that followed the DOP were supposed to pave the road for the final status deal on the most sensitive issues, including the nature of the Palestinian entity and the status of Jerusalem.

Juul argues that the spirit of the Oslo agreements was derived from UN resolutions 242 and 338, but what mattered most in the initial stage was to get the two parties to mutually recognise each other. However, from the beginning, difficulties in the implementation and interpretation of crucial details kept proving that the critics of the agreement might have been right in arguing that the lines of Oslo were too vague to establish peace.

"If making Oslo not so open-ended had been at all possible we would have done it," said Joel Singer, one

of the main Israeli negotiators for the DOP and accords. According to him, it was either this or nothing.

The reason it had to be this way, he argued, was that it "was not an agreement between two states like the one between Israel and Egypt where once you agree on the international borders you only have to work out the details of the implementation. This was an agreement between Israel as a state and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation."

The Palestinian side agrees that the beginning was not so successful but that it was a necessary step. "We hoped that we were making a beginning to end the hatred and then settle the problems," said Hasan Asfour, member of the Palestinian delegation to Oslo.

So what went wrong and why did the handshaking turn into an exchange of accusations?

"The main problem is that trust is missing. The Israelis started to bring back the concepts of hatred that Oslo aimed to erase," said Asfour. The Palestinians complain that the Is-

raelis failed to honour the interim agreement and complete the redeployment schedule, even under the Rabin-Peres Labour government that signed the agreements. The Netanyahu government made things worse by starting building settlements in Arab East Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the Israelis complain that the Palestinians are not doing enough to combat anti-Israeli Islamist militant activists. According to Singer, "Arafat was supposed to fight the Hamas and Islamic Jihad movements but instead he decided to try and contain them."

While admitting that the "situation may deteriorate further" and that more political dispute and violence may follow, those who made Oslo still refuse to believe that their work failed. "The momentum behind Oslo is lost but Oslo is not dead," said Asfour.

The way ahead, they all agree, is to try and revive the implementation process. According to Ron Pundak, another member of the Israeli delegation to Oslo, and an assistant of

former Israeli Minister Yossi Beilin, the peace forces on both sides have to make a move to put the process back on track. Some wait for either Netanyahu or Arafat to come round to the other's position, others hope for an Israeli national unity government that would pursue the road of Oslo, while people on the two sides are looking for the US and Egypt to exert pressure on both countries.

Nobody however, not even the architects of the Oslo Accords, can tell what is going to happen next.



Speeches and signatures: Gorbachev and Bush in Madrid; Arafat recognising the state of Israel, and Rabin recognising the PLO, in the presence of the Norwegian foreign minister;

'Oslo is moribund'

Is Oslo over?

In terms of implementation and honouring commitments, Oslo is moribund, but that does not mean that we are the ones responsible. Israel has destroyed most of the substance of Oslo and is attempting to keep up appearances. By doing that, it is trying to get out of its commitment and to run away from implementation in order to continue its own ideological attempts at expansion and domination.

Oslo is an instrument. It is an agreement that should govern the behaviour of both sides, so if one side totally reneges then the partnership for peace has dissolved. This does not apply to Oslo only; it also applies to the whole peace imperative in the region, which is facing destruction by this Israeli government.

The US secretary of state was expected to inject new life into the accord. What have the past four years left for her to salvage?

These four years have witnessed a real deterioration in conditions in Palestine. After an initial tentative implementation of part of the agreement, although there were violations, the assumption of government by the Likud was the first step in a drastic unraveling of the whole process and the implementation of the agreement.

This struck at the core of its credibility and of relations between both peoples. It is very clear that this government is intent on destroying the process, regressing to the language of in-

timidation, threat and domination.

Moreover, the Israeli government is using the Palestinian people as hostages to its own extremist policy, re-legitimising the language of ideology and extremism and attempting not only to renege on signed agreements but also to preempt final-status agreements by taking dangerous unilateral steps — particularly the settlements, in addition to the confiscation and annexation of Jerusalem.

Therefore we feel that, given the nature of the Israeli government, it is highly unlikely, if not impossible, that we will come to any agreement with the Israeli government.

What did the Palestinians gain from Oslo?

In concrete terms, we gained at least the withdrawal of the Israeli troops from most of Gaza and from the cities of the West Bank. We gained the return of the leadership from exile.

But beyond that, we went back to the worst type of occupation by having the Israelis behave not only like occupiers but like a government that feels it can use the most extreme measures and violations as a means of political threat and blackmail.

Are these problems a result of Oslo or of Netanyahu's coming to power?

Well, within Oslo there were flaws, of course, and, although we knew that the Declaration of Principles was not perfect and provided openings

Hanan Ashrawi, Palestinian minister of education and former spokesperson for the Palestinian delegation to Madrid, sees little hope for Oslo, or peace of any kind, as long as Netanyahu remains in power in Israel



for the Israelis to manipulate the process and use power politics, we felt that whatever we signed we had to adhere to.

But within Oslo there was the possibility of fragmentation of land, non-incremental gradualism, allowing Israel to put the Palestinian side on probation... A lot depended on the Israeli will to implement rather than on a guaranteed process, particularly in postponed issues like Jerusalem and settlements.

Netanyahu is calling for the final-status talks to be held now. How is this related to the context of Oslo?

Actually, Oslo called for permanent-status talks to begin in May 1996. By that time, it was expected that a three-year interim phase would have passed, which meant that realities would have changed.

Now we see that the interim phase agreement has not been implemented, that the realities on the ground have not changed. This means that permanent-status talks will start in a situation which is extremely detrimental to the Palestinians.

Meanwhile, Israel is trying to change the terms of reference to avoid the handover of any land. This is the danger: that Israel is trying to start the permanent-status talks by jumping together both the interim phase agreement and permanent-status issues and therefore give them equal values, so they will have us involved in technicalities and details.

We cannot in any way allow Israel to destroy the credibility of the process by canceling agreements; nor will we allow Israel to buy time by moving to permanent-status issues and getting us embroiled in endless negotiations.

But if Oslo is collapsing, what other options do the Palestinians have?

We do not think of Oslo as the end, or of the agreements or the negotiations as the objective; we feel that the objective should remain a just peace, a peace that would guarantee the rights of all people. If Israel wants to destroy the peace process, it should bear the consequences and it should not attempt to hold the Palestinians responsible.

I think that, as people who have signed these accords and who see that there are openings within Oslo to achieve permanent-status agreements, we are not going to renege on them, although we understand that the credibility of the process has been severely affected and that there is no confidence in the Israeli government and its intentions.

What are the main points which have not been fulfilled and how can we guarantee their implementation later?

There are many issues that have not been implemented from Oslo. We discussed issues of redeployment, safe passage, release of prisoners, and the airport. Israel has also committed over 30

violations: the dismantling of the civil administration, the failure to withdraw military rule, the permanent status issues...

There are endless violations that Israel has committed and agreements that have not been implemented. The time frame also played a crucial role in undermining confidence in Israel, because sovereign states honour their signatures and commitments, but Israel does not.

I think it would be unfair to hold the Palestinians responsible for rescuing the peace process single-handedly when Israel is working hard to destroy it.

I think we need a concerted effort as well as a strong Palestinian will. The Israelis are quite adamant about protecting their own right to land, and the Palestinian leadership should stand firm in the face of Israeli intimidation.

Besides, we have to work very closely within an Arab context and create a joint Arab strategy to safeguard those crucial issues on which peace will hinge, things like Jerusalem which is not just a Palestinian issue but an Arab issue too, and cannot be left to Israel.

We also feel there has to be a system of accountability and arbitration by the international community, and particularly by the US as the co-sponsor of the peace process. The US has undertaken the responsibility not only for launching the process but also for guaranteeing the way it is conducted.

Interviewed by Sherine Bahaa

The zero-sum game

For Mahmoud Al-Zahar, Hamas spokesman in Gaza, the apparent demise of the Oslo Accords is confirmation of the Islamist movement's position



It has been four years since the Oslo agreement was signed. Where do you think the Palestinians stand now? It is now clear that Hamas made the right choice when it rejected the Oslo agreements. We rejected not peace, but a formula that only guarantees Israeli security.

In offering peace, Israel sought only to abort the Palestinian Intifada and to end the long years of struggle waged by the Palestinian groups including Hamas.

According to Israeli analyses, Oslo is dead. This is obvious. I believe that any other arrangements in the future will not be labelled peace projects but bilateral security deals.

Do you think this deterioration is due to the policies of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, or to a flaw in the agreement itself?

The main problem is that the Israelis themselves do not want peace. When Yitzhak Rabin talked about redeployment of Israeli troops — not peace — his popularity ratings dropped by 35 per cent. Knowing that he needed those votes in the elections, he halted redeployment, halted talks on the Syrian track, and increased Jewish settlements by 50 per cent. Rabin was also behind the deportation of more than 100 Hamas members to Marj Al-Zuhour.

Shimon Peres, on the other hand, was behind the Grapes of Wrath operation in south Lebanon. He could have solved the Hebron problem before the elections, or even after, but he preferred to leave it to act as a time bomb.

There is no difference between the policies of Netanyahu and those of Rabin or Peres. Netanyahu is only a reflection of the general Israeli mood, which is against peace but for security.

Do you believe that US mediation and visits by senior US officials such as Madeleine Albright can revive peace in the Middle East?

I do not think that peace can exist while Jewish settlers are still stealing the Palestinians' lands and killing their children. Can you tell people not to hate if they saw their son killed or their father or brother crippled by Israeli bullets?

Israel is not willing to offer peace; nor are the Palestinians convinced that peace will be offered. The so-called peace agreements have led to increased Palestinian suffering.

What is the alternative to the Oslo agreement, then?

If we agree unanimously that the negotiations option has failed, must we bless it and accept that our hands remain tied? When Britain invaded Egypt in 1882, some thought that the British would leave through negotiations. The result was that Egypt fell into debt. The Egyptians had to offer their blood to free their country. The Palestinian issue is no different. And there is no law against freeing one's land.

More importantly, Israel is obviously preparing itself to launch a war. Israel has established a committee which is currently discussing ways of minimising war losses. It seems it will start with Lebanon. It is destabilising the situation there in order to justify an attack, or at least to extract as many concessions from Lebanon as it can.

Israel prepares a war every 10 years to raise funds, to attract the sympathy of the US and to clear up internal problems.

Do you think the Arabs are prepared for such an eventuality? The Arabs are divided into two groups: one group represented by Egypt and Syria which supports the Palestinians' cause; and a second which is unaware of the crucial nature of the issue and which is affected by Israel.

They speak about an economic summit in Doha while children are being killed in Sidon.

Do you believe that the setbacks to Oslo increased the popularity of Hamas? Hamas has proved itself as an organised movement. It did not involve itself in war with the PA. It distanced itself from an authority overshadowed by corruption.

The negative performance of the PA and Hamas' correct predictions concerning the failure of the Oslo agreements have indeed given more credibility to Hamas and given the Palestinians cause to appreciate its attitude.

Interviewed by Rasha Saad

'Crushed in its cradle'

Farouk Qaddoumi, Palestinian foreign minister and a bitter critic of the Oslo Accords, has refused to enter the territories under PA control and continues to operate from the Tunis offices of the PLO



US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was meant to revitalise Oslo. How do you see the Accords, four years on?

Oslo faltered as a result of current Israeli policy and the government's refusal to adhere to the agreements. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu insists on ignoring not only these agreements, but the very basis of the process.

The peace process was built mainly on the land-for-peace formula, together with international legal recognition, which granted the Palestinian people their political rights. Although these principles should have been implemented, nothing has materialised: refugees are refused the right of return, the central administration is controlled by the Israelis and Palestinian political prisoners continue to languish in Israeli jails.

What did the Palestinians gain from Oslo?

Nothing, except the establishment of the PLO in the Territories. Some of the PNA's managerial responsibilities — not to mention sovereignty — are still being withheld pending Israel's full commitment.

Other aspects like control over passages, a halt to settlement building and the re-

deployment of Israeli troops are still uncertain. Israel not only blocked Oslo but crushed it in its cradle.

Were these problems inherent in the formulation of the accords, or are they the outcome of Netanyahu's accession to power and his intransigence?

I trust neither the Zionist movement nor the Likud. Even the Labour Party has procrastinated since the beginning.

Israel was supposed to give back Gaza and Jericho, but withdrew from only parts of Gaza — after a five-month delay. If Israel makes security demands, the Israelis must honour their commitments. Otherwise, how can we say that Oslo is a success?

We need to reiterate that the Arab-Israeli conflict will continue as long as Israel refuses to abide by principles of international law. Instead, now they are asking for half of the West Bank.

Do you think the Palestinians have any options other than Oslo?

We agreed to a peaceful settlement, but the Palestinian people have the right to resist and

the Arabs have to show solidarity. We proved to the world that the Zionists are the ones who do not want peace.

Albright failed to achieve anything positive as a result of Israel's intransigence. When we succeed in laying siege to the Israeli government, contradictions within Israeli society, which can be seen today, will become sharper.

The Israeli government is demanding that the Palestinian Authority clamp down on all those who oppose Oslo. Is such a request legal?

The agreement does not allow for such demands. Netanyahu wants to create strife within Palestinian society, and he imposes conditions which were never mentioned in earlier deals.

Netanyahu has tried to change agreements ever since he was elected. He made the resumption of talks with the Palestinians conditional on changing the Hebron agreement.

When the two sides reached the Hebron Protocol, he refused to sign until former US Secretary of State Warren Christopher presented him with a letter of guarantees. According to this letter, Netanyahu was assured that the redeployment would be carried out

according to his own timetable. It was also up to Netanyahu to hand over authority to the Palestinians when he so chose.

All these guarantees notwithstanding, Netanyahu did not order his forces to redeploy; on the contrary, he threw the Jabalin tribe off their land and started building more settlements. Netanyahu stated clearly that Oslo was a strategic mistake.

Netanyahu is calling for final-status negotiations to begin now. How must we see this with respect to Oslo?

According to James Baker, the architect of Oslo, there should be a transitional period of two years as a test for the intentions of both parties. During those two years, the Israeli authorities should have fulfilled their commitments.

The Palestinian National Authority has presented a memorandum listing 34 points which Israel failed to fulfil. So how can Israel, which failed to implement these 34 points in the four years that have elapsed since Oslo was signed, enter final-status negotiations? How long will it take them to deal with the central issues?

Interviewed by Sherine Bahaa



Solidarity and other solutions

For Nayer Hawatmeh, secretary-general of the opposition Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Oslo's collapse is the result of the agreement's inherent fragility, but war is no option

What is your assessment of the Oslo Accords, four years on?

The Oslo Accords are being bombarded by daily Israeli aggression in Gaza, the West Bank and Jerusalem, where Palestinian lands are being swallowed by Israeli settlements.

The accords caused a split in the ranks of the Palestinian national movement and marginalised the institutions of the PLO.

Peace is now heading towards a new Oslo, tailored to fit the Netanyahu government's agenda, and supported by a biased US stance which favours Israeli expansionism.

What do you think is the reason for the crisis of implementation?

The fragile structure of the Oslo Accord is the reason for the instability now besetting it.

Oslo did not offer the minimum level of peace and security. Under Oslo, unemployment reached 65 per cent in Gaza and 50 per cent in the West Bank. Free movement became more difficult than before. Israel also continues to exert full control over the checkpoints.

What about Netanyahu's role in the crisis?

The Oslo Accord did not fulfil the minimum demands of the Palestinians, but the Netanyahu government did its best to further undermine this accord and implement an even more unfavourable option.

But is there an alternative to the current peace process?

I do not think that war is an option, given the circumstances. The Palestinians should unite their ranks on the basis of the PLO programme, their right to self-determination and their right to establish an independent Palestinian state.

What roles should the Arabs and the international community be playing?

A unified Arab stance must reject any normalisation in relations and halt bilateral meetings until Israel abides by international law and withdraws from the Palestinian lands it currently occupies.

The Arabs should give financial, political, moral and economic backing. The Palestinians must feel that they are not alone if they are to withstand Israel's arrogance and

aggressive policies.

The Arabs must also give full support to the Lebanese people in their struggle against the Israeli aggression in south Lebanon.

On the international level, why do we concede that the US is the only political referee? Why don't we encourage the international community to play an effective role in the peace process and put pressure on Israel? The US administration is not objective on this issue. It is the only country to have vetoed the UN resolutions condemning Israeli policy towards the Palestinians, even though the harsh measures Israel employs are opposed unanimously by the rest of the international community.

Interviewed by Atef Saqr



'The best option on offer'

Faisal Al-Husseini, the senior Palestinian official responsible for the Jerusalem portfolio in the PA, is convinced that the Palestinians have no option but to press for Oslo's implementation

How do you assess the Oslo agreement after four years?

The Oslo agreement is now totally frozen. In order to be implemented, the Oslo agreement required at least two partners. The problem, from the outset, was that the Israeli side at the time (Rabin and Peres) was reluctant to apply it. As for the current Israeli partner, it rejects the agreement as a whole.

Do you think that, when Netanyahu calls for final-status talks immediately, he is declaring the death of the Oslo agreements?

If the Palestinian side were to accept that (which it will not), that would be the end, not only of Oslo but of peace in general.

Any Israeli attempt to bypass the transi-

tional phase to reach final-status talks is an attempt to exempt Israel from its peace obligations.

Do you think that there is any alternative to going on with the obligations of the Oslo agreements?

If Oslo is really over, then Israel is the only winner. Oslo does not give us all our rights, but at least there is something which can give the Palestinians a foothold. Oslo is the best option on offer.

Can US mediation resolve the current impasse?

If the US is willing to mediate it can solve a lot of problems. Madeleine Albright's visit is

a positive step, but this should not be the last word. The US role is not as powerful as anticipated and is not as powerful as it must be if peace is to prevail.

Is the crisis due to the accord itself?

Looking at Netanyahu's past, one can perceive that he has always been politically immature and arrogant. The Likud came to power on the strength of its decision to put an end to the peace process.

Any peace agreement can be applied, regardless of flaws in its terms, only if the political will is present. In the same way, a flawless agreement can die if there is no political will. The Oslo agreement is no exception to that rule.

Some believe that if the peace process with Israel collapses, the Arabs will be the only losers.

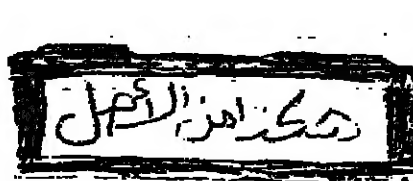
That is incorrect. Both sides will lose. If Israel is interested in playing a winner-loser game then it is welcome, but if it wants to play a loser-loser game then it will be obliged to bear the consequences.

The Palestinians are going through the calm that precedes the storm.

Do you think that all these setbacks to peace justify Hamas' military option in the eyes of the Palestinians?

This is one option that Israel will have to face if it refrains from peace.

Interviewed by Rasha Saad





the fateful handshake on the White House lawn, with the avuncular blessing of a beaming President Clinton; in Cairo, 1995; in Washington, 1996

The stage was set

For Lutfi El-Kholi, outspoken advocate of the peace process and a member of the Egyptian delegation to Madrid, the fundamental feature of the Oslo Accords is that they established the Palestinian leadership on Palestinian land, and this cannot be turned back



"The Oslo agreements were a translation of the decision made by the Palestinian National Council back in 1974, that provided for the establishment of a national authority on every inch of Palestinian land liberated from the Israeli occupation, the first decision of its kind since the beginning of the Palestinian revolution in 1965.

"The Oslo agreements were the translation of a communiqué issued by representatives of the Intifada in Jerusalem, where, for the first time ever, Palestinians under occupation suggested a political settlement on the basis of two peoples and two states.

"The Oslo agreements were the translation of the wishes of the revolution in exile and the Intifada under occupation, both of which were basically calling for a political settlement.

"This line was expressed at a time when the Palestinian revolutionary leadership was three thousand miles away from Palestine and was being subjected to a financial and media blockade that denied it an organised presence in any of the front-line Arab states.

"This blockade was imposed by the US and the Israelis in collaboration with some Arab parties who refused to allow the Palestinians to establish themselves in the countries neighbouring Israel and who refused financial aid to the Palestinian leadership. At the time, the Soviet Union insisted that it would not sell the Palestinians weapons unless payment was made in US dollars.

"This line was also adopted at a time when Israeli hostility to the Intifada was especially ferocious. Yitzhak Rabin, who was implementing a systematic policy of breaking the bones of the children of the Intifada, was at the helm.

"It was back in the 1980s that secret negotiations were initiated between some Palestinians like Sari Nasseibah and Faisal El-Husseini, and some Israelis, including members of Likud like Moshe Amiran. These meetings cost Amiran his job when Yitzhak Shamir learned about them. Today, Amiran occupies a prominent post in the army and opposes

the policies of [Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu.

"What is ironic is that Rabin — who later took the road to peace and signed the Oslo Accords — was opposed to these negotiations. So it is interesting to observe how people change their views.

"But the Palestinian revolution started the change. In its early days it was only concerned with the military aspect of the struggle for liberation. Critics always commented on its lack of political perception.

"Indeed, one of those who were trying to inject a political dimension into the perspective of the Palestinian revolution was Professor Edward Said. Said once tried to arrange a meeting between the two of us and Abu Ammar [Yasser Arafat], Abu Jihad and Abu Iyad to convince the Palestinian leaders that the PLO should work on a political project and leave the militant operations to other organisations. The meeting was never arranged.

"When Said later declared his opposition to Oslo, I told him that Oslo is in fact the political project that he had wanted the PLO to adopt. But he said, in all honesty, that he had changed his mind and that he believed Oslo to be a retreat and a deviation from the path.

"I am not at all underestimating what Said has been doing for the Palestinian cause, but we need to place Oslo within its context. The Arabs were not being of great help. Proof of this is that, in the early days of the Intifada, the Arab League met in Tunis and decided to demonstrate its solidarity by granting \$100 million to the Palestinians inside the Occupied Territories as a first instalment. To date, not a single dollar has reached the Palestinians.

"During that time, secret contacts and negotiations took place in several countries.

"While the general trend was to integrate the Palestinians in the Jordanian delegations — as was the case at the Madrid peace conference in 1991 — the Palestinians insisted on maintaining their autonomy.

"Indeed, no Palestinian, no Arab, and nobody in their right mind would have thought for a minute that the Palestinians would manage to implement the military option alone. Nor could anyone ignore the fact that every road the Palestinians tried seemed to be turning into an impasse.

"At the time, Israel decided that the PLO and Fatah, both led by Arafat, were the real enemies and had to be liquidated; they actually killed a good number of leaders of both the PLO and Fatah.

"In their quest to undermine the two organisations, the Israelis tolerated the increasing activity of Hamas, which, they hoped, would replace the PLO.

"In short, the issue was becoming very complicated. But one fact was crystal clear: the Palestinians would only be represented by Palestinians. And it was within this context that efforts were accelerated, on the fringe of the Madrid peace process, to get the Palestinians and Israelis to talk to each other.

"At the time, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark argued that it was pointless for the Palestinian and Israeli leadership to try and conduct their meetings in public and that they had to hold them secretly to avoid any adverse reaction.

"The Palestinian leadership's decision to enter these talks was a very wise one. What did they have to lose? Those who criticise the Palestinians for having gone to Oslo are in fact conducting an exercise in theoretical and absurd politics.

"At any rate, before going to Oslo the Palestinians informed the Egyptian government as well as some sympathetic individuals throughout the Arab world. The Israelis notified Washington.

"To avoid any complications, one committee headed by Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) supervised the negotiations on both fronts: Madrid and Oslo.

"At the end of the day, I would say that as a result of Oslo the PLO started to function as an establishment from Palestinian land, and that this fact alone has altered the equation in favour of the Palestinians. This, I think, is better than

having forced the PLO to negotiate all its rights when it was still in exile.

"I know that Oslo does not even cover the minimum Palestinian rights. That is why it was not easy for Arafat to accept it. But he knew that once the leadership returned to their land, they would not be easy to get rid of. That is what Netanyahu means when he refers to Oslo as a disaster. In fact, Oslo was a historic and courageous choice for which the stage was set.

"I know that the situation has changed, although obviously Israel is still the stronger side. And I know that there have been problems. But the settlement is not a smooth operation. It is a process that entails many fluctuations between gains and losses.

"The Palestinians are there, on their land, in confrontation with the Israelis. This confrontation has opened the door for the differences within the Israeli community to surface and for those opposed to the traditional Zionist scheme of Greater Israel to speak up.

"Today, about 35 per cent of Israelis are opposed to a Palestinian state, and 35 per cent support the idea — regardless of what they think about the borders and military status of this state.

"The next battle will be to try and work with the peace forces within Israel to get those 30 per cent on the side supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state. This is what I thought of doing when I joined a group of other Arabs and Israelis to work towards a peace alliance. It is not fair to say that these forces are incapable of doing anything to influence Netanyahu's attitude, because this is such a long term battle.

"Meanwhile, the non-implementation of Oslo should not be taken as a sign of the decay of the agreements; it is a mere symptom of the confrontation.

"Oslo is not dying. It will not die. Only if the PLO decides to abandon the land and go into exile once more will Oslo be dead; and I know that this will never happen."

Interviewed by Dina Ezzat

Dead, in text and in spirit

We have ceded to Israel the freedom to settle in return for illusions of hope, writes Gamil Matar



The fourth anniversary of the Oslo Accords has passed without ceremony, in spite of the overflowing optimism with which many anticipated this occasion. After all, the fact that the accords are now in their fourth year is in itself, according to some optimists, testimony to their success. This happy occasion was also to mark the completion of the second phase of Israeli withdrawal from the Occupied Territories. The Oslo anniversary came and went, however, virtually without comment. If anything, it occasioned embarrassment all around, as tensions reached a new peak, unprecedented since Oslo — indeed, since Madrid, and even since the massacres of the Palestinians in the late '40s.

There is considerable cause for embarrassment. It is extremely difficult to absolve the Oslo Accords from responsibility for the deterioration of the situation in Palestine and the Middle East in general. Political propriety has prevented some Palestinian leaders from condemning Oslo, since they saw it before it was signed and approved its ratification; but the very failure to commemorate the accords renders them a monument to the inconsistencies that continue to determine the fate of a settlement to the Middle East conflict — the "peace process", as numerous commentators prefer to call it when discussing Israeli terrorism in southern Lebanon and Palestinian and Lebanese resistance to Israeli occupation.

There have been numerous signposts along the way. All seemed to coalesce during this week, which should have marked Oslo's fourth anniversary. It is impossible to enumerate the many developments that have encroached upon the "peace process", or whatever we might choose to call it. It will be sufficient to highlight and comment on a few.

It is sufficient, for example, to note that the withdrawal to which the Israeli government committed itself in accordance with Oslo has not taken place. The Palestinians contend that the Israelis have ignored more than thirty other obligations. However accurate this may be, the fact that the Israelis have not withdrawn their forces from the areas designated by the accords is by far the most significant and potentially dangerous failure. The continued Israeli occupation, along with the expansion of Israeli settlements are the most telling indications of Israeli intentions. At least they serve to confirm long-held suspicions and compound the frustration of the Palestinian people.

There is, however, a certain difference between the occupation and the settlements, at least in terms of the language of the peace process. The term occupation in juxtaposition to the notion of withdrawal is capable of reviving Palestinian hopes that a part, if only a small part, of their land will be liberated, bringing the end of the occupation closer. Settlements, on the other hand, imply Israeli construction on Palestinian land. This is the essence of life to Israel, at least in the aggressive Zionist perception. Indeed, according to such figures as Bar Elan, advisor to Netanyahu, any suggestion of halting settlement construction or dismantling existing settlements is the talk of terrorists bent on the destruction of the state of Israel and Israeli lives.

Herein lies the error of those who approved of the Oslo Accords. "Error" is perhaps the kindest word to use in condemning those individuals who have ceded to Israel the freedom to settle in exchange for symbols calculated to inspire hope. There was no regard for a preconceived plan to speed up and increase the scale of the settlement movement. This plan could be put into effect rapidly by diverting the attention of the Palestinians with other concerns and promises, which the Israelis were certain to do their utmost to impede.

Another consequence of Oslo and the practices of the Israeli government over the past four years was an increase in the membership and power of Islamic organisations such as Hamas and the Jihad. It is easy to point to numerous contributing factors: the continued construction of Israeli settlements, the on-going occupation, the economic blockade. One of the more compelling factors is the prevalent feeling among Palestinians, and growing sectors of Arab public opinion, that we must avoid a repetition of the pitfalls experienced by many Arab parties that entered into peace negotiations with Israel. On virtually all tracks, the Arab political leaders, in response to an Israeli and American condition for the type of peace they want to impose, closed the door to alternative forms of action. One of the alternatives is the recourse to the threat of violence, whether in legitimate form (by developing their armed forces and advanced weapons systems to vie with the Israeli military machine) or illegitimately (through armed resistance). In fact, certain sectors are exhibiting a growing tendency to call for the elimination of even the more peaceful alternatives such as postponing early normalisation with Israel and supporting the Arab boycott.

These sentiments are increasingly reflected in Palestinian behaviour with the mounting pressures and hardships of Israeli closure. Support for Hamas and the Islamic Jihad has become synonymous with resistance to Israeli aggression. It is no longer politically acceptable, for example, for Fatah supporters to demonstrate or throw stones at Israeli soldiers or blow themselves up in protest against the theft of their land, or in anger — and this is no less important — against Israel's daily exercises in humiliating the Arabs. The angry, the frustrated, the hungry, the rebellious, the desperate have now decided to align themselves — morally at least — with Hamas or the Islamic Jihad. Beyond the Palestinian-Israeli borders, too, there is a palpable growth of sympathy for these organisations. The reasons for this are the same that have caused Palestinian youth to prefer their religious affiliation over any other identity as the channel for expressing their anger and frustration.

This relationship between religious affiliation and political developments has acquired a powerful force. Connected with this phenomenon is one of no less consequence: the fact that violence can no longer be brought into the service of political leaders and their policies, as it could during the years of open conflict. Violence has now become a solution in its own right. When all other peaceful avenues reach a dead end, with regard to the settlements, the status of Jerusalem or the question of economic domination, violence offers the Palestinians only hope of a solution. The implication is clear and not without historical precedent under fascist, tyrannical and colonialist systems. Violence begins when the balance of power between rival sides in a negotiating system becomes so skewed that the weaker party has no alternative other than violence in order to redress that imbalance. The more distant the hope of realising a just solution and restoring usurped rights, the more willing people will be to support violence as a solution.

A third signpost of the consequence of the Oslo Accords has far-reaching implications. Like many others, I decided to wait until the end of US Secretary of State's Albright's visit until I either confirmed or refuted my suspicions. After having followed this event and its immediate effect, I came to the conclusion that the visit confirmed and augmented the confusion in Arab public opinion as to whether the US, as a great world power, is hamstringing by Israel, or whether this global — indeed, imperial — power is in collusion with Israel against the Palestinians and the Arabs in general. Many readers will be quick to suggest that I have not come up with anything new, that the only difference between now and previously is one of degree. If the US is incapable of action, it now has its hands tied more firmly than ever: if the US is in collusion with Israel, it now has dispensed with the niceties and all pretense to the contrary. I can easily picture the groans of dismay when Albright likened Israel to the US: a country built by "immigrants who cherish freedom", and the incessant refrain that Israel's security must override all other considerations in the Middle East.

It may not be fitting, since Albright was our guest in the Arab world, to suggest that she intentionally insulted her Arab hosts in order to impress her Israeli friends, strangers in this region if not strangers to her. It may be more appropriate to assume that her statements were influenced by domestic US political considerations. I will not go so far as to believe that the US secretary of state is prejudiced against the Arabs and Muslims. I will, however, add my voice to those who assert that Albright's statements, and the failure of her visit, have confirmed what we suspected: that even the United States has, for all practical purposes, turned against the Oslo Accords, which it helped to foster and which it still claims to honour in text and spirit.

Edited by Pascale Ghazaleh

Setting the record straight

Four years after the Israeli-Palestinian Declaration of Principles, secretly negotiated in Oslo, was signed, it came under a barrage of sharp criticism. Initially celebrated as the beginning of a new phase for Israeli-Arab, and particularly Israeli-Palestinian, reconciliation, it became the potential trigger for war in the Middle East. Naturally, there was opposition to the Oslo Accords on all sides. In Israel, the right-wing Likud and Jewish fundamentalist forces hated Oslo because it laid the groundwork for a Palestinian state, deprived Israel of territories that these forces sought to occupy and annex, and because it made it possible to question and negotiate previously sacred issues: water, settlements, and above all Jerusalem.

In the Arab world, and among the Palestinians, racism and fundamentalists found in the Oslo Accords nothing but the legitimisation of the Zionist state, the total surrender of large parts of Palestine and the postponement of the major issues: water, settlements, refugees and above all Jerusalem, was restricted to a minority on both sides. Now, the opposition to the accords is in power in Israel, its influence is growing among the Palestinians and Arabs as well. Further, in the United States, where the accords were signed, a large number of critics are calling for amendments. Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* of 24 August that "the Oslo process, having exhausted its possibilities, needs to be redesigned."

When historians look back at the Oslo Accords, beginning with the fanfare of the Washington celebrations on 13 September 1993, they will discover what went wrong. On 7 December 1993, the date set for the beginning of the implementation passed without a step being taken on the ground. The prime minister of Israel at the time, Yitzhak Rabin, then announced that dates and time tables were not sacred. As is customary in the story of the Arab-Israeli peace process, setbacks were followed by stagnation, which opposition to the whole process made use in its bid to torpedo the prospects of peace. The PLO and the Israeli government were both keen on protecting their domestic fronts: an Israeli fanatic was able to massacre Palestinians praying at dawn during Ramadan.

The Hebron massacre was more than

Who killed Oslo? From breakthroughs to setbacks, fanfare to fundamentalism, handshakes and humiliations, Abdel-Moneim Said traces the stops and starts that have marked this phase of a crumbling process



enough to reactivate the peace process. On 4 May 1994, the Cairo agreement for the implementation of the Oslo Accords was signed after difficult negotiations which continued on the stage of the Cairo International Conference Hall, where the ceremony was to take place. A breakthrough, albeit a sour one, was achieved. Yasser Arafat was to return to Gaza and Jericho. The Palestinians received part of a homeland and a political authority which is coveted, not to say "handcuffed", by Israel. The following months were to witness the usual Palestinian-Israeli haggling over the transfer of authority in the rest of the West Bank. Palestinian elections, redeployment of Israeli forces, and the amendment of the Palestinian Charter.

When leaders fail to live up to their responsibilities, the opposition takes the stage and uses it to its own ends — in this case, the destruction of the peace process. This is what Hamas was able to achieve through its attack on the bus in Tel Aviv avenging those killed in Hebron, but also imposing a setback on the process toward Palestinian self-rule. When, Rabin, Peres, and Arafat received the Nobel awards at the end of 1994, the celebrations were mixed with hard feelings, frustration and disappointment.

The same sentiments prevailed throughout most of 1995. It seemed at times that "Gaza-Jericho first" would turn out to be a future far brighter than the past. For the first time, Palestinian demonstrators are denouncing the "terrorist tactics" of Hamas. They cannot surrender their hard-won freedom and independence to militants who have not been authorised to act by the sole legitimate Palestinian authority. The pro-peace camp in Israel also started to comprehend the potentially disastrous consequences of a new war. Many regional and international forces also recognised that this was the time to act. The Sharm El-Sheikh summit was

headed by Hamas was willing to give the peace process the benefit of the doubt.

On the other side of the green line, the peace camp headed by Shimon Peres held a comfortable lead in the approach to Israel's election on 29 May. The assassination of Prime Minister Rabin by an Israeli fanatic ironically boosted Peres's position; the Likud was on the defensive, and Israeli-Syrian negotiations, after a long halt, were resumed. The Israeli-Jordanian peace seemed to be warming up, and in Amman an economic summit made the vision for a new Middle East seem real, particularly after Cairo decided to host the next economic gathering. All in all, the Middle East seemed on the threshold of an era of promise. A document leaked to the press indicated that an Israeli-Palestinian understanding had been reached on final-status negotiations.

Then four suicide bombings claimed sixty lives and sparked a wave of hatred. Israelis filled the streets, chanting "death to the Arabs". The PNA was blamed and pressured to crush Hamas' political and military capabilities. Israeli soldiers swarmed into West Bank villages, punishing the families and neighbours of suicide bombers and suspected terrorists in a wave of collective punishment.

Yet it seemed that the peace process in the Middle East was not as fragile as many in the opposition on both sides had imagined. The peace process has sparked interest in a future far brighter than the past. For the first time, Palestinian demonstrators are denouncing the "terrorist tactics" of Hamas. They cannot surrender their hard-won freedom and independence to militants who have not been authorised to act by the sole legitimate Palestinian authority. The pro-peace camp in Israel also started to comprehend the potentially disastrous consequences of a new war. Many regional and international forces also recognised that this was the time to act. The Sharm El-Sheikh summit was

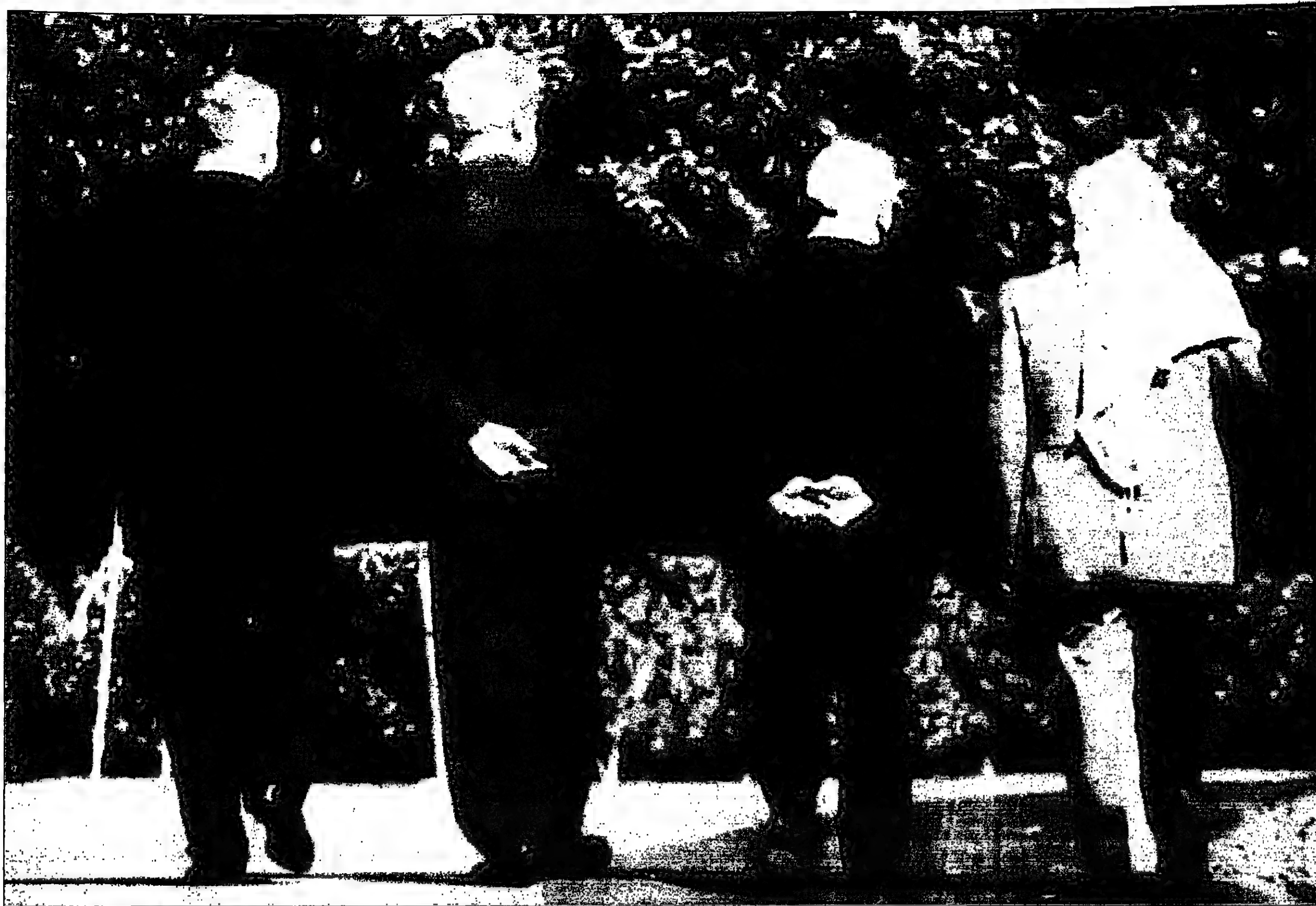
held as a signal that terrorism would not win the day. The success of the summit in the long term, it was believed, would depend on its ability to put theory into practice and avoid complacency.

Israel, however, perceived the message of Sharm El-Sheikh differently — not as the first step toward the creation of a regional mechanism to fight for peace and against terrorism, but rather as a new go-ahead for Israel to punish and terrorise civilians. The Palestinians were the first to bear the brunt of Israeli brutality. Palestinian territories were blockaded, closing off access not only to Israel but also to Egypt and Jordan. For weeks, the entire Palestinian population was literally starving.

Israel pressured the PNA and undermined its authority in the West Bank and Gaza by systematically hunting down and punishing the families of suspected Hamas and Jihad members. Israeli troops entered recently "liberated" towns and villages and methodically demolished Palestinian homes. These massive campaigns of collective punishment were applied in south Lebanon, too, where Israeli forces, through intensive shelling of towns and villages, forced a half a million Lebanese to leave their homes and take refuge in Beirut. Those who were unable to leave faced Israeli artillery. The massacre in Qana signalled to the world the horror that Israel could inflict on Arab civilians.

The story after this predicament is well known. The right-wing coalition that came to power in Israel paid lip service to Oslo but did its best to dismantle it through settlements and collective punishment. Hamas and Jihad suicide bombings were timed to prevent any progress in the implementation of Oslo through US, Egyptian, or European mediation.

Some of the blame for the failure of Oslo should be attributed to the deficiencies of the process itself. Another portion lies with the parties to the process, who showed insufficient diligence. All, one day, will have to make their apologies for having lost a great opportunity. They could have transformed the Middle East into an area of peace and tranquillity. Had they succeeded, they would have shown that we are capable of transcending human nature through the utilisation of human reason.



Walking away: from left to right, Netanyahu, Clinton, Hussein and Arafat in Washington (October 1996)

Photo: AP

Strategies of hope

We must now wage a moral battle that far exceeds anything Oslo either foresaw or promised, argues **Edward Said** — or risk being the very compromised and much impoverished permanent losers



Certainly the list of negatives against Oslo is a long one, and as we reflect on it during this fourth anniversary of the signing ceremony in Washington, the horrendous balance sheet makes it almost impossible to understand why so many Arab and Western leaders keep referring to it with such enthusiasm. But in the wake of Benjamin Netanyahu's reign, his scorched earth policy has in fact delivered up a landscape of singular bleakness even when compared with Oslo's intended devastations.

Yet enough has been said about economic, social, and political deprivations for Palestinians during the past four years (all of them attributable to the Oslo peace process) without sufficient attention paid to the human factor, surely the most important. For in the age of globalized capital and the triumph if not of the actual but of the theoretical market model, most analysts tend to reproduce one of the ideological correlates of this triumph which, I believe, is the conviction that there is no alternative to it. If you now think that only the IMF, the World Bank and market economics, which favour the wealthiest transnationals and countries, count in the world today, and that more equitable distribution and social justice are sentimentalised aspects of socialism's defeat, then you will also be condemned to think that there is no alternative but to compete in the market. Individual will and agency recede in importance, while the sheer power of market economics seems to dominate every individual everywhere. So it has been with Oslo, which has been a triumph for the powerful, in which Israel and the United States have convinced Palestinians and others that what has taken place since 1993 is not only the best, but the single remaining solution to our extremely grave problems. So the attitude today is "let us get Oslo back on track, since anything else is unthinkable."

At such a juncture it becomes evident that Oslo's greatest expense for Palestinians has been the loss of faith in what I called above the human factor. We need to remind ourselves that political struggles are always contests of will, in which one side attempts to persuade the other side to give up, to lose the will to resist and fight on. This is not a military, but a political and moral matter. I therefore think that the task for Palestinian intellectuals today is the reactivation of the will and, just as important, to revive belief in the possibility that what human beings do can make a difference. The tragedy of suicide missions is that they stem from hopelessness; they cannot be part of a programme for national revival since what they promote is negation for its own sake. The problem with the present impasse is not that Madeleine Albright and the US are unwilling to pressure Israel enough but that the leadership is caught up mainly in the effort to survive, in the effort to mobilise as many Palestinians as possible to resist what Israel, in its arrogance and blind heedlessness, is trying to do to us as a people. This attempt at survival is understandable but insufficient as the core Palestinian strategy since the good of the many, the good of the nation is of far more significance than the well-being of a few. So what then are the imperatives?

Some of them are obvious and scarcely need insistence here. *Sumud* is crucial, as is the building of civil institutions by and for Palestinians.

quite independently of what the Palestinian Authority may or may not have in mind. For we have a tendency to think only in literal terms, not sufficiently in symbolic and moral ones. The greatest victory of Zionism has been a sustained one for a whole century: to persuade Jews and others that "a return" to an empty land is the proper, indeed the only solution for the afflictions of genocide and anti-Semitism. What has been totally lost in this project of course is the exorbitant price paid by Palestinians who, as invisible, silent, or mainly irrational and violent "lesser" beings have all along been considered sacrificable to the grand Zionist fulfilment. After spending many years living, studying and being active in the struggle for Palestinian rights I am more convinced than ever that we have totally neglected the effort — the human effort — required to demonstrate to the world the immorality of what was done to us: this, I now think, is the essential task facing us as a people now.

Unless we mobilise ourselves and our friends and, above all, our voices so that the Zionist project can systematically be shown for what it is and was, we can never expect any change in our status as an inferior and dominated people. Even as Arafat and his men try unsuccessfully to deal with Israel's actions they seem to have forgotten that no voice (or voices) speaks for the suffering of the Palestinians, no effort is made to record systematically the wrong we suffer, no energy is expended on trying to organise our various expatriate communities so that they can undertake the task of dramatising and finally defeating the legitimacy of the plan to take the whole of Palestine, every significant inch of our land, every aspect of our past as a people, every possibility of self-determination in the future. For at bottom our struggle with Zionism must be won first on the moral level, and then can be fought in negotiations from a position of moral strength, given that militarily and economically we will always be weaker than Israel and its supporters.

The importance of this was first borne out for me when I visited South Africa in May of 1991. Mandela had already been released, exiled leaders of the ANC had been repatriated, and the stage was set for the huge political transformation that was to ensue with democratic elections four years later and the victory of the "one person one vote" programme of the ANC. When I was there I visited the ANC's headquarters in downtown Johannesburg; a scant few weeks before the organisation was considered as terrorist, and no legitimacy at all attached to it. I was stunned by the complete reversal. Speaking to Walter Sisulu, who had been exiled for almost 30 years and was second only to Mandela in authority and prestige, I asked him how the transformation had been possible. What exactly did the ANC do to turn defeat into victory? "You must remember," he said, "that during the eighties we were beaten in South Africa; the organiza-

tion was wrecked by the police, our bases in neighbouring countries were routinely attacked by the South African army, our leaders were in jail or in exile or killed. We then realised that our only hope was to concentrate on the international arena, and there to delegitimise apartheid. We organised in every major Western city; we initiated committees, we prodded the media, we held meetings and demonstrations, not once or twice, but thousands of times. We organised university campuses, and churches, and labour unions, and businesspeople, and professional groups." He paused for a moment and then said something that I shall never forget as long as I live. "Every victory that we registered in London, or Glasgow, or Iowa City, or Toulouse, or Berlin, or Stockholm gave the people at home a sense of hope, and renewed their determination not to give up the struggle. In time we morally isolated the South African regime and its policy of apartheid so that even though militarily we could not do much to hurt them, in the end they came to us, asking for negotiations. We never changed or retreated from our basic programme, our central demand: one person, one vote."

Let me add one footnote to this. On the basis of my South African experience I organised a seminar in London for every leading Palestinian activist-intellectual that I knew, including a few who have since become ministers in Arafat's government. I invited the ANC ambassador in England, whom I had met in Mandela's office and was on the same plane with me out of Johannesburg, to address one of our sessions, and he gladly accepted. The idea was to impress on everyone, a mere matter of weeks before Madrid, that we should all tirelessly focus on the same facts about what had happened to us as a people, and should not get deflected into discussions about policy and grand negotiating tactics with the Israelis and the US and so lose sight of the political-moral goal of isolating the Israeli occupation and delegitimising it all over, as the result of a carefully organised mass movement in Europe, North America, the Arab world, and elsewhere. There was some resistance to listening to the ANC representative talk about his experiences. "South Africa is a different case," said a distinguished young Palestinian political scientist who thought we should be addressing Oxford or Harvard experts behind closed doors, not wasting our time on trying to create a grass roots movement of support for Palestinian human rights. I remember saying that we should always make it a point to be as concrete as possible — to talk about daily life under Israeli occupation, to talk about the humiliations of check points, of how our houses were blown up, and how our trees were uprooted — and not to talk to audiences as if we were negotiating theoretical issues. All in all I and my co-organisers of the seminar felt that we had made some progress. But the moment Madrid gave us an opportunity to appear in

public we all started to speak like James Baker, forgetting that our status had more weight as representatives of a moral cause than as members of a diplomatic delegation. And of course the goal changed, so much so that in the Oslo negotiations and in the period after them we forgot not just our values but our own history.

I am convinced that we have no recourse now but to return to the discourse of the oppressed and use what Netanyahu is now doing to us as an initiative to put his policies in direct contact with the history of Zionist policies towards the Palestinians. After all he speaks in a straight line of descent from what every major Zionist theoretician has declared: that Jews have a superior right to Palestine despite the presence and existence of Palestinians. We must not only contest what is now being done to us, but also take our moral presence directly into the Israeli and Western, and even the Arab, consciousness. Zionism's original sin was to have dispossessed us, and what the Likud now does is what Labour had done before it, to continue the original dispossession under the guise of "peace" and "security." But this confrontation cannot be undertaken by individuals acting alone: it must be a job of organising and then implementing such a plan by the world-wide community of Palestinians. Arafat and his coterie have never understood this. They have always supposed that if they could get the attention of the president or secretary of state, or even of various prominent Jewish leaders in the United States, these influential people could be persuaded to do "something" for the Palestinians. I have always refused the premise that what we demand as a people ought to be conceded to us charitably, or in bits and pieces as a reward for our good behaviour. This is to diminish ourselves and what we stand for, since our position as a dispossessed people is morally unassailable. So it is therefore evident that each Palestinian community must organise itself so as to intervene in the public discussion now taking place on a world-wide scale about the conflict between us and those Israelis who support Netanyahu. But even that supposed majority of Israelis who say in polls that they are for peace have to be recalled to our reality, which is that of a people whose land was taken so that Israel could be built.

I am not at all saying that we should advocate the destruction of Israel, nor the dispossession of Israelis. Our movement gains its moral stature by its humane dimensions, its sincere willingness for coexistence, its firm belief in respecting the rights of others. What I am talking about is a new peace initiative designed over a long period of time to bring parity between us and the Israelis, who so far overpower us now as to make the moral dimension our only field of struggle. We must show Israel and its supporters that only a full acknowledgement by them of what was done to us can bring peace and reconciliation. To do this, therefore, we must have a policy of con-

crete detail, not one of broad, abstract statements that are not fully engaged in the struggle for opinion. It would be good, for example, to remind readers of journalistic articles that various sites in Israel were once Arab from which their original inhabitants were expelled. Thus in a recent profile of Anatoli Scharansky by David Remnick in *The New Yorker* magazine Remnick mentions casually that the Soviet activist now resides in Qatamon, "an old quarter in West Jerusalem," without saying to his readers that it was an Arab quarter emptied of its inhabitants by force in the early months of 1948. Similarly when Albright cites her appreciation of "Palestinian suffering" we should be challenging her to do the arithmetic in public: how many Palestinians need to suffer and for how long and in what way for Israel's security anxieties to be allayed? Or yet again, in a recent issue of the *New York Times* Sunday magazine which contained a profile of Jibril Rajub by Jonathan Goldberg, who admits to having served in the Israeli army, we should be publicly challenging the appropriateness of an ex-Israeli soldier to write fairly of a Palestinian activist. The examples can be multiplied infinitely, but all of them rest on one assumption: that, as a people, we carry a full-scale moral argument that has never been fully heard or taken into account. What we ask for is acknowledgement, not destruction, equality, not subordination. I think also that we must always be very clear in our understanding of Jewish suffering and in making it apparent that what binds us together is a common history of persecution, which must be shown not to be the exclusive possession of the Jewish people.

Only by raising our voices in concert and registering moral victories can we then further encourage and empower our compatriots in Palestine or in the various refugee camps in the Arab world. We should be voices of courage and honesty both of them credibly connected to an ongoing effort to gain real self-determination for the Palestinian people. I know that skeptics will say that words are not as effective as deeds, and that only the experience of facing Israeli settlers on the land is what counts. But that, I think, is sadly to miss the moral dimension that must be expounded on wherever there are people to listen and unjust power to engage with directly. The greatest victories of Zionism were not simply that they had better armies than we did, but that they had organised opinion to accept and even support the idea that settling Palestine with incoming Jews was a morally positive idea.

We must now undertake the same laborious task, first of delegitimising Israel's military and colonial policy in Gaza and the West Bank, then of giving our quest for self-determination the authority it still lacks. We should be prepared to ask academics and professionals to boycott visits to Israel unless they make an effort to visit and support Palestinian universities and institutions; we should also be mounting a campaign to ensure that tourists to Israel who think of it only as an "interesting place" should begin to see it as a land where two peoples must live together peacefully and equally but now do not. In other words, what we now have before us is a commitment that far exceeds anything that Oslo either foresaw or promised, and if we do not take up the challenge I fear that we will be the very compromised and much impoverished permanent losers.

Close up

Salama A. Salama

Unless we comply

The aim of Madeleine Albright's visit to this region seemed to change mid-course. While her original aim may have been to save the peace process, it was soon transformed into a mere effort to obtain Arab acceptance and backing for America's role in the Middle East. The result was that Mrs Albright came away with a maximum of prestige and praise, whereas the Arabs did not achieve a single one of the five points they had agreed upon during their tripartite summit meeting before her arrival. As for Netanyahu, he was able to obtain a definite commitment that Israeli security was paramount and that the remaining issues could be postponed indefinitely.

As usual, the Arabs were full of praise and boundless approval for the "promising start" to the Albright mission, the "spirit of optimism" she infused in every capital she visited, and the light she revealed at the end of the tunnel, although nobody else could see it. This, of course, comes at a time when Netanyahu not only openly refuses to stop carrying out "unilateral measures" (the term used by Albright with regard to the creation of new settlements, in order to avoid ruffling Netanyahu), but also steps up his military operations in southern Lebanon, encourages settlers to create more settlements in East Jerusalem, and affirms his intention to continue building in Jebel Abu Gheina.

During her visit to the region, Albright did not focus on the essential issues that blocked the peace negotiations with the Palestinians, Syria and Lebanon, or the collapse of the principles on which they had been based. Instead, she concentrated on censuring the Palestinian Authority and urging it to crush and imprison members of Hamas, who represent 30 per cent of the Palestinian population. She repeated her non-sensical remarks that there could be no comparison between bombs and bulldozers — ignoring the fact that Israeli terrorism consists precisely of pulling down houses, setting up blockades, expropriating Palestinian land, and imprisoning thousands of Palestinians on the mere suspicion that they might be a danger to the security of Israel's occupation.

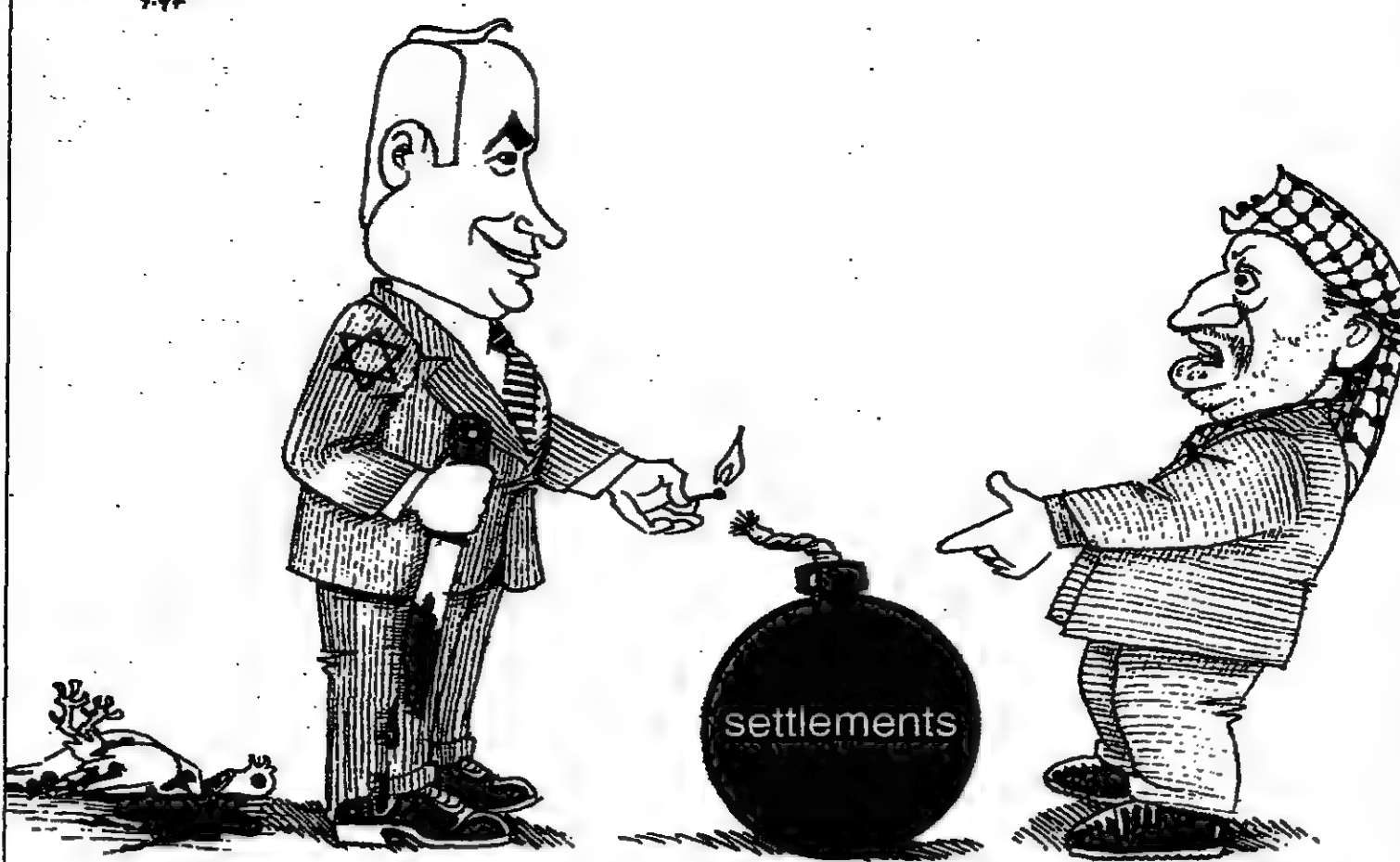
In her televised interview in Egypt, Albright denied that she had discussed with Netanyahu the freezing of settlement building in the West Bank. She focused on building a climate of trust — but without any clear statement on Washington's position regarding settlements, nor any hint at Washington's policy on Israel's refusal to withdraw in accordance with the agreement. Nor did she comment on the US Congress's call to sever relations with the PA and cut off financial aid.

So nobody can know for sure what Albright asked the Israelis to do in order to rescue the peace process, apart from certain esoteric references to America's support for the UN Security Council's two resolutions and the principle of land for peace. There is considerable doubt about America's position regarding these basic principles. It seems that Mrs Albright has no new suggestions other than those laid down by Netanyahu: security is paramount; Arafat is entirely to blame for violence — even if that violence comes from Israel itself; and the Doha conference must take place at any cost.

It was hoped that Mrs Albright, the representative of a country which assumes sole responsibility for peace in the Middle East and refuses to allow any other party — including Europe — to interfere, would offer practical solutions and definite ideas. Some may even have hoped that she would reaffirm the principles already agreed upon by all parties to resolve the current stalemate and define the responsibility for any shortcomings.

She preferred to employ soothing diplomacy with Netanyahu and force with Arafat, courtesy with Mubarak, Fahd and Hussein, and soothing with Assad. She departed without making the slightest impact — except to announce that she would not be returning to the region, "unless... Nobody seems to know what that 'unless' can be.

Gomaa



No magic formula

If the Clinton administration is to convince the Arabs that it can be an honest broker, writes James Zogby, it must continue to challenge Netanyahu — and Congress

Given the political climate in the US and the Middle East, no one had high expectations for the outcome of the secretary of state's first foray in the region. But President Clinton is clearly aware of the grave dangers that exist if the peace process continues to falter — dangers not only to Israelis and Palestinians, but also to US standing and its interests in the Middle East as a whole.

At a recent meeting with members of the Arab American community, President Clinton made it clear that Secretary Albright must convince Israelis and Palestinians and the US's other Arab allies that the US is committed to be a truly honest broker in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict.

As low a measure of success as this might be, it is a necessary prerequisite to any further progress. It is also a useful guide by which to evaluate the secretary's visit.

Regardless of the fact that, when pressed, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has made halting concessions, there is still widespread agreement that he is not committed to full implementation of the peace accords signed by his predecessors. While Netanyahu recently offered a map of territorial concessions he is willing to make in final status talks (considered by some in the Jewish community as a breakthrough, since no Likud leader has ever agreed to any territorial concessions), these are dismissed by some administration officials as "unacceptable cantons" which fall far short of fulfilling Palestinian aspirations. In any case, Netanyahu has now withdrawn consideration of any further redeployments until his security demands are met.

The Israeli prime minister appears to feel that he can play his cards as he wishes because he has strong backing from the US Congress and the politically powerful US Jewish community.

To reinforce this point, a paid advertisement endorsed by five US senators appeared in major US papers on the day before the secretary's departure. The ad, an open letter to President Clinton, spoke of PA President Yasser Arafat in disgracefully harsh language, calling him a "villain" and terming his behaviour as "macabre". The ad and a similar letter sent to the president by 44 members of Congress

urged the secretary to focus her visit on Palestinian terrorism and to refrain from asking for Israeli concessions.

Has the administration resisted this pressure? At two meetings Arab American leaders had with National Security Advisor Sandy Berger and Under-Secretary of State Thomas Pickering just before the secretary's departure, we pressed the administration to adopt a more evenhanded approach. We specifically called on the secretary to reaffirm that the basis of the peace process was "land for peace" and implementation of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, and urged her to pressure the Israelis on settlement construction, acts of collective punishment against Palestinians (house demolitions, land confiscation, and closure).

We also urged her to push for implementation of the interim accords. Finally, we noted that, if the secretary was to succeed in restoring confidence in US leadership, she must use public diplomacy in an evenhanded manner. It would be unacceptable, we noted, if the only public message that came out of her meetings focused on security issues. If public pressure was to be used with the Palestinian side, it must be used with the Israelis as well.

While many Arabs have faulted the secretary for focusing on the security dimension of her mission, it is important to note the significant portion of her message that addressed Arab concerns with the peace process. Even when addressing the issue of terrorism, the secretary and other administration officials voiced their concern not only in terms of their concern for the loss of innocent Israeli lives, but the damage that terrorism does to the Palestinians, noting that these attacks target the peace process and the PA, and threaten Palestinian gains. In fact, one official noted with frustration that each act of terrorism is timed to take pressure off the Israeli prime minister's failings and to focus US and Israeli attention on the security issues instead of on Israeli policies.

At the same time, Secretary Albright did reaffirm US commitment to the "land for peace" formula and to implementation of UN resolutions 242 and 338. Throughout the week, administration officials con-

tinued to refer to PNA President Yasser Arafat as "our partner in the peace process", thus refusing congressional efforts to demonise and isolate the Palestinian leader.

And the secretary reserved her sharpest comments for acts which destroy confidence in the peace process: settlement building, land confiscation, demolition of houses, and confiscation of Jerusalem ID cards. She also spoke eloquently of her concerns for Palestinian suffering, referring on a number of occasions to the "difficult" and "horrible" conditions in which Palestinians are forced to live, and calling on the Israelis to make efforts to improve Palestinian daily life.

To add further clarity to her message, the secretary also had a well-publicised meeting with the widow of assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and a meeting with Israeli President Ezer Weizman, the contents of which were later revealed to the press by State Department Spokesman Jamie Rubin.

Following her visit with Secretary Albright to the tomb of her late husband, Leah Rabin spoke harshly of the current Israeli prime minister. She accused Netanyahu of attempting to "bring Yasser Arafat to his knees" and said she had doubts that the prime minister wanted peace. Mrs Rabin said: "To say it is possible for Arafat to stop the terror without there being forward movement toward peace is impossible."

To add to the pressure on Netanyahu, the State Department Spokesman told reporters that President Ezer Weizman had said that "the US should be prepared to pressure Bibi to finish the second stage of redeployment on the West Bank". Rubin added, "I thought that was a remarkable statement by the Israeli President." According to Rubin, Weizman also said that "Israel should not use economic pressure against the Palestinians."

While some Arab commentators heard only part of Secretary Albright's message, it would be unfair to ignore the rest, or the carefully staged events with Mrs Rabin and the Israeli President and the impact that they were designed to have. Clearly the secretary was not misunderstood in the US, where the headlines told

Soapbox

Gold, and a sword

The press campaign that preceded Secretary of State Albright's visit to the Middle East, led by *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, demanded that she openly support Israel against the Arabs. That, indeed, is what Albright did on the first day of her visit to Israel. She declared quite clearly that the core of the problem is Israeli security. Arafat and the Palestinian Authority must devote themselves to crushing Hamas and disarming the resistance.

Albright knows that the current crisis has reduced the Oslo Accords to dust. Reducing the crisis to a threat to Israeli security will not lead to the resumption of the peace process. It will not help the Palestinian or Arab regimes, even those willing to make more concessions, to find a face-saving pretext before returning to the negotiating table. In other words, Madeleine Albright knows perfectly well that her statements will only serve to sharpen the crisis.

Why did the US secretary of state come to the region? Most probably, she did not come to search for a way out of the deadlock. Her visit concerns the forthcoming Middle East/North Africa (MENA) economic conference in Doha. Syrian opposition to the Doha conference has increased, and support for the Syrian stance is steadily growing, as a result of the obvious failure of Oslo. There is no longer any justification for attending.

Madeleine Albright came bearing gold in one hand, and a sword in the other. US aid and US troops serve to remind the hesitant and the reluctant that, no matter how strong the grounds for Syrian refusal, the American rationale remains irresistible.

This week's Soapbox speaker is a professor of international law at Ain Shams University.



Hosam Elssa

Millennium in the Middle East

Word games hold sway at the end of one millennium and the beginning of another — but behind the words, the games are all about power, politics and money, writes Nawal El-Saadawi

I am optimistic by nature — I do not know why. The child inside me can offer great hopes for what the future holds in store for us, as women, on the threshold of the 21st century. But sometimes this child disappears, especially in our region: the "Middle East". The name itself shows that others have named us in relation to their location in the world. If we were to call it "the West", and the United States could be the "Far West". Will this happen in the coming millennium? Maybe then men will stop naming women, and we might give men another name, one derived from the womb (such as womb).

Almost every morning, I open my eyes to news of bombing, bloodshed, massacres, people killed in our region. Almost every day, I read about "peace". The longer I live in this world, the more I discover "war" hiding under the word peace, injustices hidden beneath justice, dictatorship disguised as democracy, and colonialism protected by freedom.

Everywhere I go in the "Middle West" or the "Far West", I am asked about my identity, my nationality, my gender, my age, my class, my religion, my culture, my politics and my sexuality. If my answers do not fit in, they are not recorded. The international media, just like our national media, is controlled. Freedom of speech is like the free market. It is not free, except when freedom means "freedom of the powerful to do whatever they like".

I am a novelist, a writer, who refuses to play the game. To be a writer, you have to know how words game. The most famous word in this millennium play game (and probably in the next) is "peace". It looks wonderful on paper and in conferences. But in reality, we have never known peace under this word. We are in the dark with the word every day by the postmodern media. But more and more people are killed every day, in Palestine, Iraq, Algeria, Sudan, Zaire, Rwanda, Pakistan, Afghanistan...

Some days ago, an innocent child was shot dead by Israeli soldiers, his mother and sisters abused and killed, their house demolished. I saw the photograph in the newspapers. The house was knocked down by

bulldozers. Why? They are Palestinians.

When your nationality is not the right one, when your gender and class are against you, what do you do as we approach the millennium?

On 1 July 1997, I participated in a demonstration in the streets of New York, in front of the tall building of the United Nations. Children organised the demonstration. Their aim was to stop all economic embargoes in the world. In Iraq alone, 450 children die of hunger every day because of the embargo. After the demonstration, we met top officials in the UN. We discovered that the UN has no power. It is dominated by the United States. Now we call the UN "The United Nations of America" (UNA).

If you have nuclear military power and the veto in the Security Council, you do not need international law or the UN Charter. You can violate all laws and all UN resolutions and still be right, legal and respected.

"Power" is the key word in this millennium and the next, as long as we are governed by the capitalist patriarchal system. All injustices based on race, gender, class, nationality, religion, colour, or creed can be justified in the name of God, the Lord, the King, the President, the husband, the father, or the leader of the United States. Everything can be reversed as long as you have power internationally, nationally, or in the family. Double standards are a universal law.

War, the arms race, foreign invasion, economic embargoes, increasing poverty and unemployment, drugs, rising religious fundamentalism, globalisation, neo-colonial exploitation, resource depletion, environmental degradation, women's veiling and circumcision, inappropriate technologies, structural adjustment and World Bank conditions: these are some of the problems we suffer in our region. They are not considered the result of the global and local ruling system, but the result of our underdevelopment, our lack of intelligence, our inability to rise to higher levels of morality and spirituality. Why? Is it our black or brown colour, our culture or religion as Muslims or Arabs?

The word "spirituality" is a very ambiguous word. It is frequently used nowadays, and will be used more

and more in the next millennium, with other similar words, such as family values, moral values, authentic cultural identity, or religious freedom.

No wonder American aid to poor countries, including Russia, is linked to religious freedom. Sometimes it is linked to democracy or a multi-party system, human rights, or even female circumcision.

Anything can be used or abused to hide certain political or economic gains. Everything in our life is political. Love and sex cannot be separated from politics. The family unit is the basis of the state.

The political movements known as religious fundamentalism, which have increased in all major religions of the world, have been accompanied by a vigorous promotion of spirituality, morality and family values. All these enforce differentiated gender and class roles, with the intention of subordinating women to men, the weaker to the powerful, the poorer to the richer, the ruled to the ruler.

Religious fundamentalist groups, whether Christian, Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist or other, pose acute problems for us as women, especially working women, who earn their living and do not expect men to provide for them.

Many spiritual groups share substantial areas of doctrine with religious fundamentalist groups. They are all political. If God orders his chosen people in his holy book to kill other people and invade their land, it means that the holy book is political, since military orders are of a political nature and have political and economic aims.

As we approach the millennium, we witness the rise of so-called globalisation, the free market, religious freedom, democracy, multi-party politics, multiculturalism, pluralism... Yet the result of all these freedoms is nothing but more killing, more terrorism, more poverty, more fanaticism — religious, ethnic, sexual, racial or national.

The free market sends us bad food, bad meat, nuclear waste. It is the freedom of the powerful to exploit and deceive. International and national laws require, explicitly or implicitly, that a small country obey a big country, exactly as a wife should obey her

husband in personal status law. The rule of obedience legitimates the disciplining of the weaker by the stronger, and thus makes our countries vulnerable to military and economic sanctions exactly as it legitimates disciplining of the wife by the husband, and thus makes women vulnerable to physical abuse.

UN Security Council codes and vetoes reinforce the oppressive aspect of the international law of obedience, exactly as the personal status code helps enforce the wife's obedience to her husband.

Contemporary fundamentalism in the five major religions promotes doctrines related to women which are very similar to those preached to slaves. Women may be considered spiritually equal to men in heaven, but not physically equal on earth, their religious duty is one of submission to their husbands; they should feel happy with their inferior position and accept bearing, divorce, or economic and sexual deprivation, since these are punishments for their sins as daughters of Eve, the original sinner.

In the US and other Western Christian societies, there are explicit and implicit laws which prohibit equality between men and women, or between coloured and white people. Almost all types of racial, sexual and class discrimination are based on the so-called divine plan, on the spiritual superpower in heaven, behind which the material superpower on earth operates.

Women's oppression is not linked to Islam only, as is maintained by many Westerners, including feminists. This contention is part of the international political game. It provokes Muslims to defend their religion, and others to defend theirs.

The debate now is a religious debate. The conflict in the world is no longer political or economic but cultural, religious, and spiritual. Conferences are held to discuss something called the "clash of civilisations", or cultures, or religions. The Arab-Israeli conflict is cultural or religious, between Muslims and Jews. It is part of the global and local political-economic game.

The writer is a novelist and the author of many works on feminist and other social and political issues.

Listings

EXHIBITIONS

World Press Photographs
Opera House Gallery, Opera House
Downtown, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm. Outstanding photos taken during the period of Sept 1996-August 1997.

Collective Exhibition
Espace Gallery, 1 El-Sherif St.
Downtown, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm. A retrospective display of works by Assem Sharaf, Dina El-Gharib, Hassan Ali Ahmed, Hazem El-Montassir, Hikmah El-Zam, Hassan Sharif, Mohamed Abdel-Moneim, Omar El-Fayoumi and Sherif Abdel-Bade.

Takayoshi Tazuma (Photographs)
El-Hanager, Opera House grounds,
Giza, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm. Exhibited under the title Children of the Planet Earth, the photographs are of children from 188 countries to which the photographer travelled.

Amala Association for Contemporary and Folkloric Arts
Exhibition Hall, A-Haraz Building,
El-Giza St., Giza, Tel. 586100. Daily 10am-6pm.

Mina Sarofim (Paintings)
Espace Gallery, 1 El-Sherif St., corner
of Mohamed St. Downtown, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

Photographs from India
El-Hanager, Opera House grounds,
Giza, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

Group Show
Doria Gallery, 21 Abdel-Aziz Gawish St.
Downtown, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm. Works by Hassan Naji, Adham Wani, Hosni El-Banani, Seif Wani, Fatma Khatib, Mohamed Nagui and Zakaria El-Zaim, among others.

Group Exhibition
Islamic Cultural Centre, 3 Sheikh
El-Masry St. Downtown, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

Summer Collection
Espace Gallery, 1 El-Sherif St., corner
of Mohamed St. Downtown, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm. Works by Tahiya Halim, Abdel-Wahab Morsi, Salem Salah, George Bahgat, Hassan Abdel-Fattah, among others.

Group Exhibition
Mansoury Gallery, 8 Cham-
pollion St. Downtown, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

Whitman
Cairo Book Gallery, 17 Yousef El-
Ghaili St. Downtown, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

Sobhi Gougi (Sculpture)
Espace Gallery, 1 El-Sherif St., corner
of Mohamed St. Downtown, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

Suzanne Mubarak Children's Museum
El Abu Bahr El-Seddiq St. Heliopolis,
Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

The Museum of Mr and Mrs Mahmoud Mahmoud Khalil
1 Kufour El-Akhdhi St. Dokki, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

Egypt's largest collection of nineteenth century European art, amassed by the late Mahmoud Khalil and his wife

Egyptian Museum
Tahrir Sq. Downtown, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm.

Coptic Museum
Mar Girgis, Old Cairo, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm.

Islamic Museum
Fort Said St., Ahmed Maher St., Bab
El-Khalil, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

Museum of Modern Egyptian Art
Opera House grounds, Giza, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

Mohamed Nagui Museum
Chalouk Pyramids, 2 Mahmoud Al-
Ghaili St. Giza, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

Mahmoud Mukhtar Museum
Tahrir Sq. Downtown, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

Permanent collection of works by the sculptor Mahmoud Mukhtar (d. 1934)

FILMS
Festival of Czech Films
El-Hanager, Opera House grounds,
Giza, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10am-6pm, Fri 10am-5pm, Sat 10am-5pm.

21 Sept. 9pm: American (1994), based on the novel by Franz Kafka and di-

rected by Vladimir Michalek
22 Sept. 9pm: The Princess from the
Forest (1995), directed by Zdenek Tro-
ska
23 Sept. 9pm: Indian Summer (1995),
directed by Sasa Gaden
24 Sept. 9pm: The Edge (1994), di-
rected by Jan Svěrák

French Films
French Cultural Centre annex, 27 Sa-
ad Abu Alam St. Heliopolis, Tel. 340 6861.
18 Sept. 7pm: Smoking, directed by
Alain Resnais
22 Sept. 7pm: No Smoking, directed by
Alain Resnais
French Cultural Centre, 1 Madrasat
El-Hayouq El-Feransa St. Moussara,
Tel. 340 6861.
22 Sept. 9pm: Smoking, directed by
Alain Resnais

Spanish Films
Cervantes Institute for Spanish Cul-
ture, 20 Adh St. Khaled passage,
Downtown, Tel. 340 6861.
22 Sept. 9pm: Marlene Clara (1936),
directed by Juan Ben
23 Sept. 9pm: Sins of Spain
(1938), directed by Benito Peres
24 Sept. 9pm: La Loba Se Va a Los
Puertos (1947), directed by Juan de
Orduña

Italian Films
Italian Cultural Institute, 3 El-Sheikh
El-Masry St. Downtown, Tel. 340 6861.
18 Sept. 9pm: Sentenza Parola, based
on the novel by Antonio Tabacchi, di-
rected by Roberto Faenza and starring
Marcello Mastroianni
23 Sept. 9pm: La Naja, based on the
novel by Alberto Moravia, directed by
Damián Damiani and starring Bette
Davis

Faces of Japan: The Entertainer & Young Baseball Heroes
Japanese Information and Culture
Centre, 106 Qasr El-Ain St. Garden
City, 18 Sept. 9pm.

Love on the Pyramids Plateau
French Cultural Centre, 1 Madrasat
El-Hayouq El-Feransa St. Moussara,
Tel. 340 6861.
23 Sept. 9pm: La Naja, based on the
novel by Alberto Moravia, directed by
Damián Damiani and starring Bette
Davis

Russian Films
Pushkin Centre for Russian Culture,
127 El-Tahrir St. Dokki, Tel. 340 6861.
Russian and Egyptian film screenings
every Monday at 10pm.

**Commercial cinema change their pro-
gramme**
Information provided at radio through in-
formation after which it is wise in check

THEATRE
Bakht FI Istanbul
Hilton Ramsis Theatre, Hilton
Ramsis annex, El-Ghaili St. Tel. 340 6861.
Daily 10pm, Fri 10pm, Sat 10pm.
21 Sept. 9pm: The Devil's Own
Odeon III, Abdel-Hamid Said St.,
Downtown, Tel. 340 6861. Daily
10pm, 1.30pm, 3.30pm, 6.30pm &
9.30pm.

Amazonda
Tahrir, 112 Tahrir St. Dokki, Tel. 340 6861.
24 Sept. 9pm: La Loba Se Va a Los
Puertos (1947), directed by Juan de
Orduña

Arabic Music Ensemble
Small Hall, Opera House, as above.
18 Sept. 9pm: Sentenza Parola, based
on the novel by Antonio Tabacchi, di-
rected by Roberto Faenza and starring
Marcello Mastroianni

Yehia Ghanem Group
Small Hall, Opera House, as above.
19 Sept. 9pm.

Big Band Trumpet Ensemble
Gomhouriya Theatre, 12 Gomhouriya
St. Tel. 340 6861. 19 Sept. 9pm.
Raouf El-Ghany performs.

Master Symphony II
Main Hall, Opera House, as above.
20 Sept. 9pm.

Piano soloist Brigitte Engelhard and conductor Ahmed El-Saedi perform Mozart's Symphony No 35 in D major K. 583, De Falla's 'Night in the Garden of Spain' and Tchaikovsky's 'Mourning' Symphony op 38.

Frankophiler Group
Gomhouriya Theatre, as above, 20
Sept. 9pm.
A German musical show.

Harp and Song Recital
Small Hall, Opera House, as above.
21 Sept. 9pm.
Manal Moshkhat (harp) and Nevine
Allouba (soprano) perform.

'A'lat Wania (Wania's Family)
Qasr El-Nil Theatre, as above.
21 Sept. 9pm.
Directed by Mohamed Sobhi and
starring all the family members
of the television series.

El-Zaim (The Leader)
El-Dawra Theatre, Pyramids Road,
Giza, Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10pm, Fri 10pm, Sat 10pm.
21 Sept. 9pm.

Ballo (Fantasy)
Madrasat New Theatre, Yousef Abbas
St. Nasr City, Tel. 340 6861. Daily
10pm, Fri 10pm, Sat 10pm.

**A large crowd including Mahmoud El-
Ghaili, Salah El-Saidi, Samah An-
war and Ahmad Abdel-Baqi and a con-
tingent of Russian ballet dancers, di-
rected by Samir El-Afroui.**

Crouah, Zahedi (Cabeza, Yopuri)
Radio, 24 Talaat Harb St. Downtown,
Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10pm, Mon & Fri,
Sat 10pm.

**Said Saleh and dancer Nagwa Fouad,
directed by Essam El-Sayed.**

Ta'm El-Kalam (The Taste of Words)
El-Tahrir, Ataba Square, Downtown,
Tel. 340 6861. Daily 10pm.
Abdullah Mahmoud, Farouk Naguib
and Manal Salama, directed by Hos-
sain Salama.

Lalla Foll (Jasmine Night)
Flooding Theatre, Adjacent to Uni-
versity Bridge, Monial, Tel. 340 6861.
Daily 10pm, Fri 10pm, Sat 10pm.
Mahmoud El-Ahri directs Ola Rami,
Emad Rashad, Mohamed Farid and
Ahmed Ibrahim in a light musical.

LECTURES
Cattle Breeds and Cattle Cuts in An-
cient Egypt
Egypt Exploration Society, British
Council, 102 El-Nil St. Agouza, Tel.
340 6861. 23 Sept. 10pm.
Lecture by Dr. Penelope Wilson, De-
partment of Antiquities, Cambridge.

**Deterioration of the Islamic Archi-
tectural Heritage in Cairo: Sugges-
tions for Conservation and Restora-
tion**
American Research Center, 3 Simon
Bolivar Sq. Garden City, Tel. 340 6861.
24 Sept. 9pm.
Lecture by Dr. Salah Lammari, general di-
rector of the Centre for Islamic and
Preservation of the Islamic Archi-
tectural Heritage.

**All information correct at time of go-
ing to press. However, it remains wise
to check with venues first, since pro-
grammes, dates and times are subject
to change at very short notice.
Please send information to Listings, Al-
Ahram Weekly, Giza St. Cairo,
Tel. 340 6861. Fax 37869833.**

**Compiled by
Inji El-Kashef**

Cairo International
Festival for
Experimental
Theatre Awards

International Jury's Awards:
Best Performance: 70 Hill Lane,
the Improbable Theatre Company,
UK

Best Director: Eva Magyar and
Csaba Horvath for *The Dis-*
simulators, the Shamans Physical
Theatre Company, Hungary

Best Actress: Chrisanthi Douzi for
her performance in *Atrides*, Spring
Theatre, Greece

Best Actor: jointly to Rainsford for
his performance in *The Descent*,
Chapel of Change Company, Aus-
tralia and Mirush Kashi for his per-
formance in *Socrates' True Apol-*
ogy, The National Theatre, Albania

Best Stage Technique: *Aquarium*,
Laboratorio Teatro Settimo, Italy

The Algerian Love Journey by the
Theatre Group of the Culture and
Information Centre received a special
mention from the jury as a mark
of solidarity with the Algerian
theatre artists and as a tribute to
those who lost their lives fighting
to keep theatre alive in Algeria.

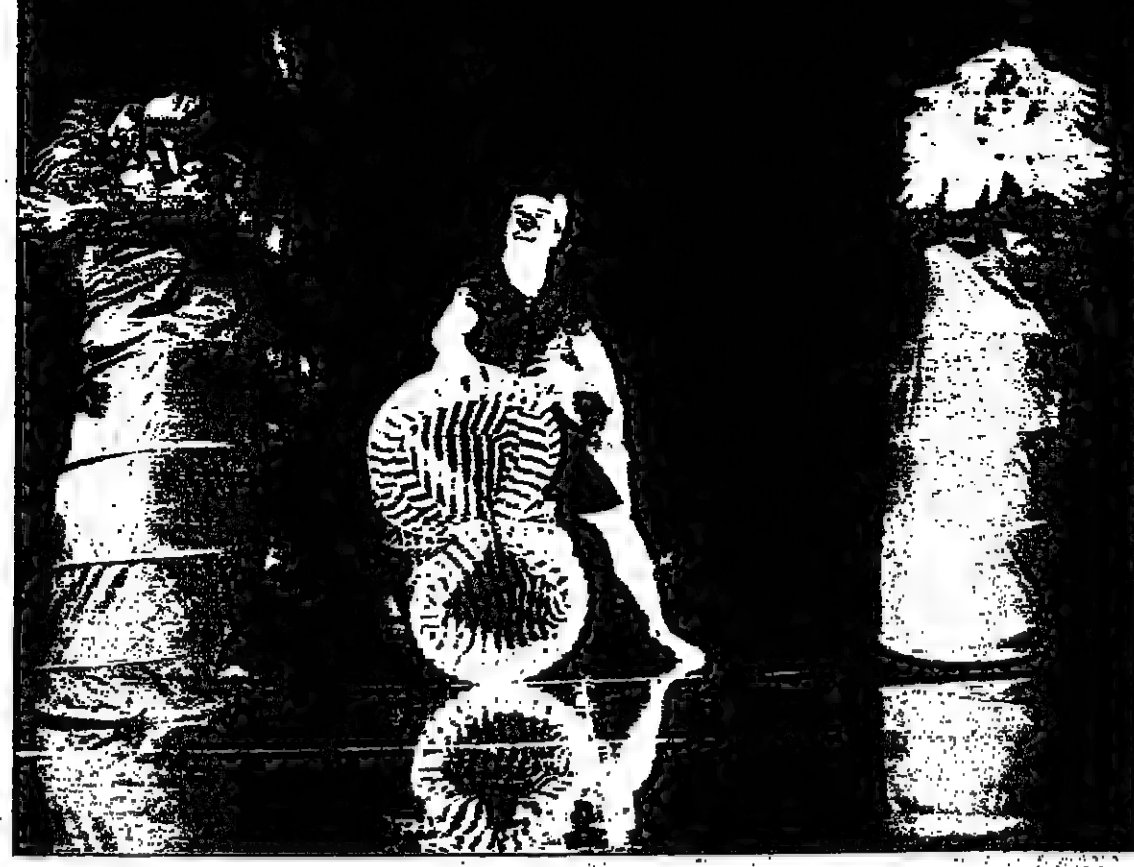
The Egyptian Critics' Awards:
Best Performance: *Atrides*, Spring
Theatre, Greece

Best Film: *Deep Waters* (France)
Best Director: Jacques Deschamps
for *Deep Waters*

Best Actor: Nur El-Sherif for his role
in *Afreet Al-Nahar* (Demon of the
Day), Egypt

Best Actress: Ezekiel Benirso for her
role in *Please Don't Go* (Turkey)

Best Supporting Actor: Mohamed
El-Taggy
Best Supporting Actress: Laura
Cebida for her role in *Loving Look*
(Spain)



Alexandria Film Festival for Mediterranean Countries Awards

International Competition

Awards:

Best Film: *Deep Waters* (France)

Best Director: Jacques Deschamps
for *Deep Waters*

Best Actor: Nur El-Sherif for his role
in *Afreet Al-Nahar* (Demon of the
Day), Egypt

Best Actress: Ezekiel Benirso for her
role in *Please Don't Go* (Turkey)

Best Supporting Actor: Mohamed
El-Taggy

Best Supporting Actress: Laura
Cebida for her role in *Loving Look*
(Spain)

Best Editing: *Loving Look*Best Screenplay: *Loving Look*Best Cinematography: *Before the*
End of Time (Greece)

Best Directorial Debut: Peter
Nicolis for *Wonderful Years that*
Sucked (Czech Republic) & Sandra
Nashat for *Mabrouk and Mabrouk*
(Egypt)

Special Jury's Award: *Please Don't*
Go (Turkey)

Panorama of Egyptian Cinema
Awards:

Best Director: Inas El-Degheidi for
Deniella

Best Actress: Yusra for her role in
Deniella

Best Actor: Yehia El-Fakhari for
his role in *Mabrouk and Mabrouk*

Best Supporting Actor:
Al-Montassir Bill-Lah for his role in
Mabrouk and Mabrouk

Best Supporting Actress: Manal
Afifi for her role in *Al-Rasaf* (The
Pavement)

Best Editing: Salwa Bekas for
Deniella

Best Cinematography: Maher Razi
for *Deniella*

Nature morte

David Blake
listens to the dark



Pantalone e Colombina

Cairo Symphony Orchestra:
Pops I; Omar Khairat, solo
piano; Mostafa Nagi, con-
ductor; Cairo Opera House,
Main Hall, 13 Sept.

Omar Khairat's music is
aloof, expensive-sounding
and detached — very.
The concert he gave with Cairo
Symphony Orchestra under
Mostafa Nagi had super flair,
his own. No one here in Cal-
ro makes the same noises as
he does. He is imitated and
plagiarised, but nothing
comes close to the original.

He is up in the trees. He
knows his gifts makes an ef-
fect and doesn't give a damn.
But this attitude of his merely
brings his audience closer,
and he has a big one. They
enjoy the slight slouch he
gives to the shoulders as he
settles down without the
slightest mannerism to play
the piano. He and his music
are immediately up in the
leaves and branches, removed
most definitely from the ad-
oring crowd. He has the media
trick of bending forwards but
keeping his distance as, at the
same time, he slightly bends
backwards. Everything about
him is affluent and well-
covered — and so is his mu-
sic. It is not the sound of
need, of lonely souls wander-
ing through the night of
hells and frustrations. Hades
is far away. People may die,
get shot in Khairat's music,
but they never kill them-
selves.

What can you do with the
music, the core of which is
irrespressible? Khairat sug-
gests people and places, for
example lunches with blue
point oysters flown in from
Kingston Bay, elegant people
and expensive situations out-
side the range of ordinary
money. His tone has that ex-
cessive surface which moves
easily into cinema, media and
sometimes theatre and always
suggests something big is
coming up. It does. It is the
Khairat gift of melody. Real
melodies — and his are —
are like going up a tall build-
ing in a lift. The song starts
out at a certain level then
shoots up to floor 8; the me-
lody is still there but chang-
ing. Up again to maybe 21,
its apex: it has a new colour,
but is the same creation. Then
it plunges down to the ground
floor and the same face, in a
different guise, appears. All
"melodic" composers know
these facts. They cannot be
bought or taught. You either
have them or you don't.
Fame is no cover up for their
lack. Neither Sondheim nor
Lloyd-Webber have a melody-
maker inside them. Khairat

has. And it is a feeling in the
air that makes an audience
know what is coming and
wait for it.

At this concert many of the
anticipated "favourites" ar-
rived. The orchestra weaves
the opening patterns, then
there is, almost, a hush which
vibrates through and from the
listeners — and then the
Khairat piano swerves into
the melody. It is palpably
physical. Lehar has it; Verdi
has it; it belongs in opera, yet
Khairat so far veers away
from the voice.

How can this music be de-
scribed? We are moving into
a period of musical confusion
with the doubtful aid of tech-
nology that everything is in
the meltdown turning into
something else. Where will
Khairat be in the next 20
years? Is it pop, op, trip-hop
plain, collage post-nouveau
or man-handled dissonant
counterpoint? His music has
such strong charisma it
seems as if he is just be-
ginning to compose.

After the overture, which
was a sop to traditional val-
ues, we settled into the big
tune from the Khairat *Ballet*
El-Nil done at the opera a
few years ago. The ballet
could survive; the tunes
have; they really make for a
powerful atmosphere which
enters the emotions of an au-
dience. Then came *Uncle Ah-*
med's Case, sad and dis-
turbant, followed by
Enchanting Perfumes. All
these are big city music; eve-
ryone knows them; they echo

down through the lanes and
tunnels of Cairo.

The melodies of the first
half of the concert, before the
break, moved the big audi-
ence. The Cairo Symphony
Orchestra seemed ferociously
happy with the tunes and
with the enthusiasm of Most-
afa Nagi's handling of them.
Khairat's sheer bravado in
managing his own melodies
is breathtaking because he
throws them up in the light
for you to admire and then
without ado scrubs them out
with a thick black chalk... and
we begin again from scratch.
He never allows time for a
song to go flat, to lose emo-
tional momentum.

After the break things
changed. We began a form of
listener's dance. We settled
into the big time form: soft
and slow, loud and fast. First
a hint of romance, then the
chase begins. Through a
maze of rhythms, blue, red,
jazz, fox-trot, even rumba
and flamenco, we are driven
as in a police car. But are we
the police or the quarry on
the run? Crook or cop? Tear-
ing along past buses, human
bodies, piles of almost any-
thing bursting with living
manner, we go through tun-
nals over bridges. What is it? Cal-
ro or the Big Dussman him-
self? We'll see you again at
the river crossing or in the
river itself. The voice of the
mega-palace is the voice of
Khairat and it is not restful.

La Compagnia Teatro Im-
magine and Archicembalo
Ensemble di Venezia: Pan-

talone e Colombina; music
by Mozart; Enrico Zanovello,
conductor; Gomhouriya
Theatre, 11 Sept.

This performance was rest-
ful, facing stage, down left,
was placed at the side of the
Archicembalo Ensemble of six
players, five strings and one
cellist, the creator of this
group from Vicenza, Enrico
Zanovello, a fascinating
player. Lined across the stage
against black curtains was
the Compagnia Teatro Im-
magine of Venice as five
characters from the Italian
comedy del'arte.

The effect they make as the
play begins is one of restful
silence in spite of the fine
Mozart playing of the musi-
cians. You can look at each
performer individually as they
form a line across the stage
in their respective cos-
tumes. Are these puppets,
dolls, or merely activated
shades of real people? They
begin a sort of drama of mis-
representations. Each of the
characters seems to be in trou-
ble and finds his neighbour a
nuisance. Each puppet grows
in character. Colombina be-
comes a delicious idiot. She
primps about, a smile for eve-
ry character on stage, not one
of whom seems to recognise
her or each other. She is
dressed in sunflowers, as
symbols of a setting sun, not a
bloom at its height.

There is some trouble. Ro-
mance rears its head among
the creatures and heads wag
warningly. The puppets —
Pantalone, Dottore, Ar-

lecchino and Pierrot — circle
around Colombina. They
have no identity but their cos-
tumes. What remains is
doubt, slight annoyance, in-
security, a sense of being
lost, or found — what's the
difference? They all shrug.
All they seem to feel is an-
noyance, but at what? A fly
passing.

The little dance grows more
serious. What is it a dance of?
Life? Or could it be of that
other thing? No mention of
the word. All motion stops —
only Mozart continues down
at the shadows on the left.

Don't discuss anything, just
dance. Jig about and, for
God's sake, smile. These ge-
nial idiots have a lot of us in
them. Hoffmannsthal once said
be careful of the comedy del'arte,
its smile has another
side.

The little jiggling group is
not quite so funny now. Har-
lequin falls flat in a somatic
fit. Is he...? Could he be...?
Don't say the word. Just be
silent, and don't be silly. No
one knows anything. Better
not use words. Look what hap-
pened to Leopardi. Silence is
best under all conditions.

Anyway there's always
Mozart. That man there, that
round thing in black velvet
like a football, could be Pan-
talone or it could be... you for
God's sake or... me.

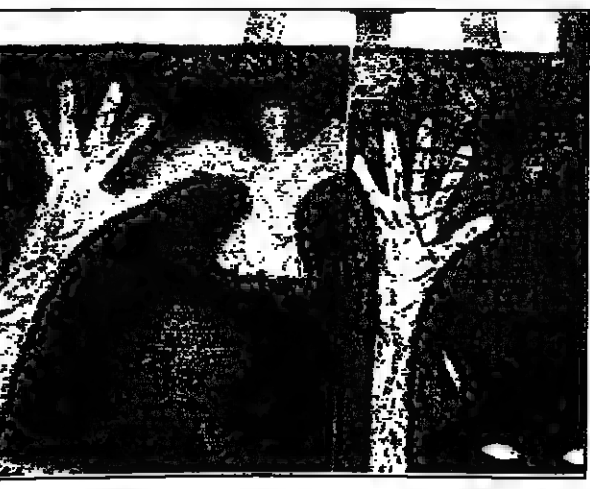
Harlequin has revived. You
see he was not... Don't wor-
ry, eat well, keep dancing.
It's all written in the mirror
of life.

The Mozart ends.

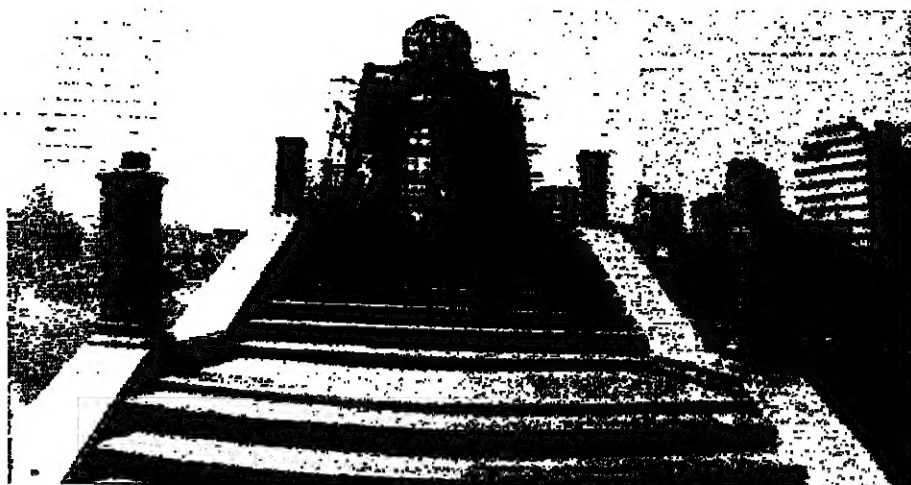
Around the galleries

TWO, for want of a better
term, "naive" artists —
Zakaria Soliman and Sa-
her Attallah — exhibit
their works at the Spanish
Cultural Centre, Alex-
andria. In Soliman's mixed
media works, strange
worlds come into being:
stars transpire from faces,
animals grow human hands,
hands grow doves. At-
tallah's work, which com-
bines motifs drawn from
folkloric art with more or-
ganic, vegetal elements, ex-
hibits a daring use of colour
and a strong sense of com-
positional balance.

Reviewed by Nagwa El-Ashri

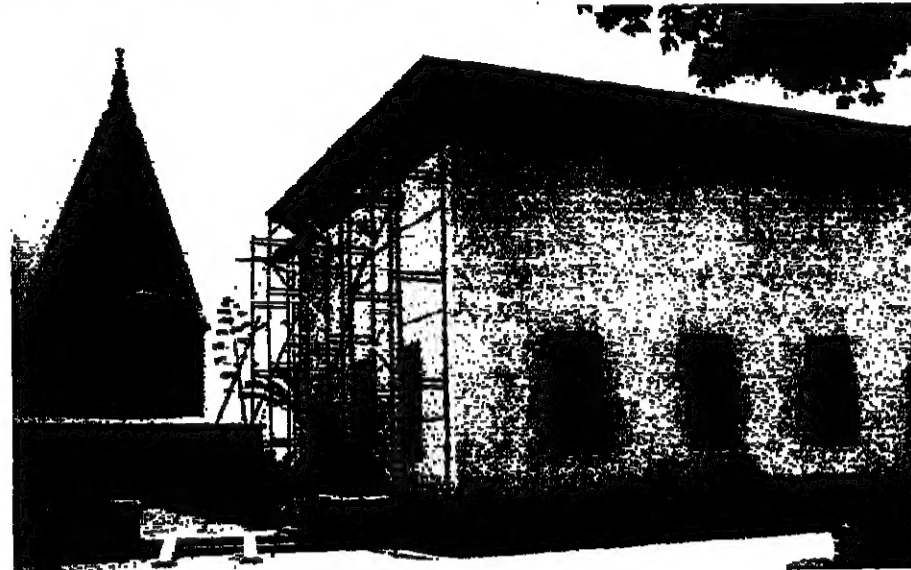


Zakaria Soliman

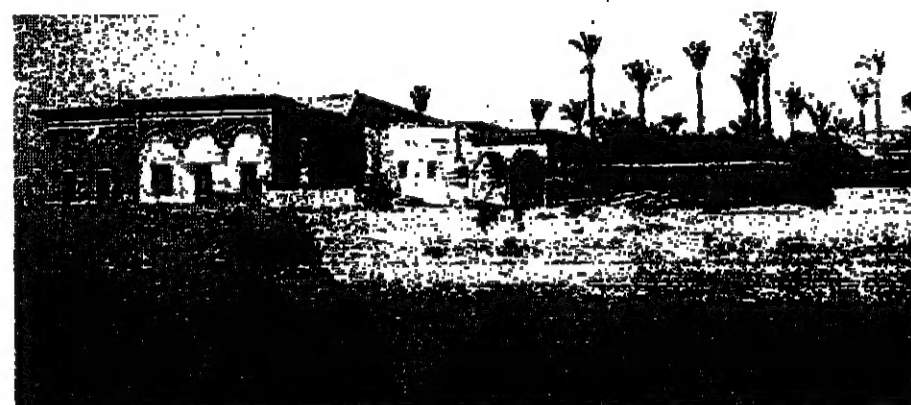


Could it be mistaken for the Ponte Vecchio?

photo: Antoine Albert



Redoing the woodwork



Once a fortress, it was also home to turtle-doves

Roda's rococo ruins

On the southern tip of Roda, the remains of a once lavish abode stand not far from the Nilometre. Fayza Hassan fears for the future of the Manasterli Palace

Unlike his powerful ancestor, one of Salaheddin's successors at least was not partial to mountain air. El-Malek El-Saleh Negmeddin Ayyoub deserved the Muqattam and its Citadel, preferring to dwell close to Fustat, on an island in the Nile, where he ordered a fortified palace to be built.

According to El-Maqri, the palaces and dwellings on the island had to be razed to make room for the construction of the new royal residence, which rose magnificently from amidst lush gardens. The palace was built on the site of the Nilometre Palace. When the buildings were finally ready, Negmeddin moved with his entourage, his harem and his Mamelukes to live on the island, becoming the first of the Bahari (from *bahr*, or sea) Mamelukes. It is said that Selim I stayed in this palace when he came to Egypt in 1517 and it is there, according to a number of historians, that an attempt on his life was made by Mameluke emirs who wanted to vindicate the hanging of Toman Bay, the last of the Mameluke sultans.

At the time when *La Description de l'Egypte* was compiled, only the main *qa'a* (reception room) and a monumental gothic wooden door, carved by Crusaders taken as prisoners of war, remained of Negmeddin's palace. This *qa'a* is described by many historians and researchers as a rare prototype of Mameluke architecture.

On part of the ruins of Negmeddin's palace, of which only the *qa'a* remained, another palace was built during the reign of Mohamed Ali, completed during the reign of Abbas and owned by Hassan El-Manasterli, who was appointed Kakhuda (Lieutenant) in 1830 and placed in charge of the Maglis Al-Ahkam (council of justice). In 1854, he was replaced by Ismail Pasha. He was demoted by Said Pasha on the grounds that he was not fulfilling his duties as expected, having exhibited many of the failings of a typical bureaucrat.

Informing him of his disgrace, Said wrote to him: "While I had hoped — and was expecting — that you would serve me well, it has come to my attention that you are neglecting your duties, arriving at your place of work between 4.00 and 5.00 o'clock and leaving no later than 9.00 or 10.00. You spend your time reading for your own pleasure and performing your prayers in the middle of the day. Such behaviour has produced innumerable delays in your attendance to my subjects' problems and has resulted in the piling up of more than 150 files containing cases up for litigation to which you have not directed your attention until now."

"As I have told you time and again, both verbally and in writing, nothing is more important to me than the affairs of my subjects. From your attitude, I gather that your personal endeavours are preventing you from bringing swift solutions to my subjects' problems, an enterprise that I personally consider more

worthwhile than your devotions. Since I realise now that you are incapable of giving priority to the affairs of the state, and leave the problems of my subjects unresolved instead of speeding up the process of justice, I suggest that you take more space and time for the practice of your own interests, withdrawing from public service and remaining in the comfort of your home."

El-Manasterli became governor of Cairo in 1854 but remained in this post for only a year. He then held a couple of minor administrative offices from 1857 to 1859, whereupon he ceased any public activity. He died in 1859, and was buried in a small mosque next to his palace, in which he had prepared a tomb for himself and another for Sheikh Abdel-Rahman Abu 'Ouf, a Sufi sheikh, who, it is said, had visited him in his dreams and ordered him to build him a tomb.

Only the reception area (*salamlek*) of the Manasterli Palace remains to this day, surrounded by an open area laid

with marble floors and topped by a carved and painted wooden ceiling. A splendid, similarly carved and painted, wooden cornice extends beyond the open area and runs around the bottom of the roof. When the palace was built, the Mosque of the Nilometre was pulled down to allow for the palace servants' quarters to be erected in its place.

Ali Mubarak described the palace in his *Khatat* as having begun to fall into disrepair soon after El-Manasterli's death. He predicted its disappearance in the near future. "All that is left," he writes, "is the *salamlek*, consisting of a single storey made of stone covered with stucco. The ceilings are of wood and the floors and walls are decorated with baroque and rococo motifs. The rest of the palace has been pulled down to make room for a water station. Of the beautiful surrounding gardens, nothing remains. Only a fountain has been salvaged, which now graces the gardens of the Islamic Museum in Cairo."

"Access from the main western entrance reveals a large hall leading to a *qa'a* [front reception room] with three *iwans* [open reception rooms] surrounding a smaller square *qa'a*, in the middle of which stands an oval fountain. The ceiling of this *qa'a* is slightly domed, while the *iwans* are crowned with half-domes of carved wood. Doors from the main *qa'a* open onto several rooms and a bathroom. The verandah-like open space which extends from the west to the southern side of the palace, and opens directly onto the Nile, features supporting wooden columns and a painted wooden ceiling."

For a time, this open area was used for monthly concerts during the summer months, mainly by the Arabic Music Troupe, but the place became unavailable to the troupe two years ago, says Abdel-Aziz Qanani, who used to attend every concert. There were unconfirmed rumours of a complete overhaul of the Manasterli Palace — or what

remains of it — as well as its grounds, including the makeshift wooden bridge which had been erected in 1987 to allow spectators to cross from the Maadi Corniche to the southern tip of the island, to attend performances of the play *Salome* by Mohamed Salmawy. Today, the bridge is already in poor condition, and resembles a hastily erected scaffolding somewhat past its prime. According to a source close to the Ministry of Culture who prefers to remain anonymous, the bridge was to be replaced by a copy of Florence's Ponte Vecchio, complete with craft and souvenir shops and a number of fashionable cafés and restaurants.

A feasibility study for the project was initiated but nothing seems to have come of it.

Right now, the palace is undergoing some restoration work under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. The reconstruction has been entrusted to independent contractors, while the interior walls are being redecorated by young students of the Faculty of Fine Arts. Recently, large marble slabs were being laid in one of the main reception rooms, while the elaborate designs which once adorned the walls and ceilings of the palace were being painted over in enthusiastic pastels, which made up in brightness what they lacked in accuracy. It appears that, once the restoration work is completed, the palace will become a museum for the jewels belonging to famous singer Umm Kulthoum, whose private villa in Zamalek was pulled down shortly after her death, and replaced by an unsightly tower.

Sources:

J-C Carcin, B Maury, J Revault, M Zakariya: *Palais et Maisons du Caire I* (CNRS, 1982).

Doris Behrens Abouseif: *Islamic Architecture in Cairo* (The American University in Cairo Press, 1989).

Mohamed Hovameddin Ismail: *Al-Qahira, 1805-1879* (Al-Afraq Al-Arabiya, 1997).



Plastic surgery for a palace which, among other distinguished guests, briefly housed the Arab League

photo: Randa Shaath

Garden of delights

RODA Island (From *rawd*, meaning garden) is the only one in the Nile which has remained unchanged for centuries. By Byzantine times, a fortress had been built on its shores. During the overflowing of the Nile, it was connected to the mainland by a bridge resting on boats. Shortly after the Arab conquest the Nilometre on its southern tip was rebuilt. Apart from Negmeddin's fortress and palace, which were eventually abandoned while the rulers went back to the Citadel on the mountain, the island was covered with vegetation and sometimes beautiful gardens. Many travellers coming to Egypt visited the island and wrote about its gardens.

Claude Etienne Savary, born in 1750 in Vitre, Brittany, waxed lyrical in *Les Lettres sur l'Egypte* (1785-1786) about his frequent visits to "the beautiful gardens of Roda," which he pre-

ferred to "the mosques in ruin and the dilapidated palaces of the Citadel." Walking under the sycamores, the tamarind and orange trees, he inspired many travellers who retraced his footsteps to the island in search of the magic. "Sometimes, a few rays escaping from the sun ploughed a luminous furrow through the shadows, covering part of the leaves with gold. Emanations from the flowers and plants scented the air. A multitude of turtle-doves flew from one tree to the other, undisturbed by my presence."

In 1806 Chateaubriand, awaiting an audience with Mohamed Ali, asked to be taken to Roda: "We were much closer to the Pyramids... At this distance they seemed of an immeasurable height... through the greenery and rice fields, the course of the river, the tops of the palm trees and sycamores... the light of the sun tinted the

arid chain of the Muqattam, the Libyan sands, Saqqara and the plain of the tombs on the horizon, with an admirable sweetness. A cool wind chased small white clouds towards Nubia and raised ripples on the vast sheet of water of the Nile floods. Egypt appeared to me as the most beautiful country in the world."

Visiting Egypt in the 1840s, Gerard de Nerval appears more critical, however: "Do not visit the island of Roda," he warned; it had been "transformed by Ibrahim into an English garden with artificial rivers, Chinese lawns and bridges."

Sources:

Jean-Marie Carré, *Voyageurs et Ecrivains Français en Egypte*, 2 vols., IFAO, Cairo (2nd edition).

Sprucing up the Egyptian Museum

Showcasing its most cherished pieces like the fabled treasures of Tutankhamun's tomb and new acquisitions are part of the current scheme. **Nevine El-Aref** reports

"Entrances and exits will be controlled, security and lighting will be improved and, for the first time, there will be a special hall in the museum for the presentation of illustrated lectures and the screening of documentary films," said Mohamed Saleh, general director of the museum. Saleh went on to explain that special attention will be given to the new display of "Tutankhamun's treasures." "All the halls are being attended to," he said.

The project started at the beginning of the summer when two electronic security gates were in-

stalled at the museum's entrances, for visitors and the administration. Moreover, the visitors' entrance and exit passages are now separated by thick unbreakable glass. "In addition, two electronic ticket machines, like the ones in the underground stations, have been installed at the museum's entrance and exit points. These are equipped to count, minute by minute, the number of visitors moving in and out of the museum," Saleh explained, adding that this will allow the security services to accurately control the number of visitors in the museum at all times "and

thus prevent any potential thief from spending the night in the museum and taking priceless items."

Also, the space between the sarcophagi and their lids is being covered with unbreakable glass, "to prevent a thief from jumping in and hiding until closing time when he could spend the night choosing whatever he wants."

The arrangements being made for Tutankhamun's halls include not only a completely new layout for the treasures, but the installation of new lighting and showcases equipped with the latest technology

for safeguarding the museum's "treasure collection. New identification for each object on display or in different languages and brochures, calendars and postcards of Tutankhamun's collection will be distributed among the visitors. The walls will also be cleaned and damaged tiles replaced."

The Egyptian Museum has undergone various renovations and improvements since 1993, but this latest endeavour is the most far-reaching to date. The upgrading of the security system is financed by the Supreme Council of Antiquities

(SCA) while the rest of the project is being financed by donations from the American Research Centre in Egypt (ARCE), the Fulbright Commission, the Dutch Association for International Cooperation, Ahmed Ezz, head of the Tenth of Ramadan Investors Association; as well as the International Arab Corporation. The SCA is providing the materials needed for all the renovations: wood, glass, textiles and air-conditioning units. The new showcases and new furniture will be manufactured in the workshops of the SCA.



Object of the month: Royal children

A NEWLY discovered statue of a woman holding four royal children has gone on special display at the Egyptian Museum this month, reports **Nevine El-Aref**.

This new exhibit is a continuation of the Egyptian Museum's programme of special displays on the theme of motherhood, launched early this summer. The limestone statue shows a seated nurse holding three royal infants in her arms with a fourth one lying in her lap. Two baboons, one holding a mirror and the other a container for *kohl*, appear on the sides of the seat.

The statue is inlaid with coloured glass and semi-precious stones and has been described by Mohamed Saleh, general director of the museum, as "unique".

The statue was discovered early this year by a man digging in the basement of his house near the Pepi I Temple in Tel Basta in Zagazig. Archaeologists, however, suspect that the statue has been moved there in modern times, probably in the course of a smuggling attempt.

The statue, which underwent restorative work before its display, shows design features common to both the Old and New Kingdoms, according to Ali Hassan, secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities.

From Nineveh to New York

The UN imposed sanctions on Iraq have proved destructive on many levels including the country's antiquities as recently disclosed by an American archaeologist who spoke to **Omayma Abdel-Latif**

Nineveh, capital of the Assyrian empire, has been exposed to massive looting of antiquities according to an American archaeologist. Professor John Malcolm Russell, a member of a California team who have been excavating in Nineveh since 1990. He claims the international mafia took advantage of the breakdown of authority in the Iraqi city to loot and smuggle out of the country invaluable pieces of antiquities from the palace of Sennacherib, king of Assyrians, who captured Jerusalem in 701BC. An account of the looting has been disclosed by Russell in his book entitled *From Nineveh to New York* due on the market this month. Russell told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that sculptured slabs of the palace have been sold in international antiquities markets.

"Most of these relics have not been published. Some show unusual subjects and provide valuable information on visual narrative composition in Assyrian palace decoration,"

said Russell.

Only two years ago, in 1995, did the team realise the necessity to document the remains of Nineveh after Russell was shown a fragment of an Assyrian relief for sale on the antiquities market.

The ruins of Nineveh were first explored back in 1847 when a young British adventurer Austen Henry Layard explored the ruins of the ancient city and rediscovered the lost palace of Sennacherib. The king had crossed the Tigris River from modern Mosul in northern Iraq to capture Jerusalem. Inscribed in cuneiform on the colossal sculptures in the doorway of its throne room was the king's own account of his siege of Jerusalem. The palace is one of only two preserved Assyrian palaces in the world. The other is the palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud.

"There is no doubt that the fragment came from the same slab, which was intact in the Nineveh Site Museum in 1990 but which has been broken up by looters."

Soon thereafter, Russell was shown two photographs of two more fragments that had been in storage in Nineveh in 1990, but which are now also on the art market. One came from Hall XLIX of Sennacherib's palace and shows labourers towing a load toward the right. "The other," says Russell, "is more unusual. It shows two dead sheep and a dead man floating in water."

"I know of no occurrence of domestic livestock shown this way, other than a fragment that shows a dead buffalo in the water, which was found by George Smith during his excavations at the west end of the palace in 1874."

It has proved impossible to determine who was offering these three fragments for sale, or where they were being kept so Russell decided to take things in hand. He published a report alerting prospective buyers that the sculptures had been stolen from the site museum at Nineveh. These fragments, he warned,

would be poor investments.

Since Iraqi law prohibits the export of antiquities from Iraq without an official permit, and since these sculptures have no such permits, Iraq would have clear legal grounds to reclaim them from any purchaser. Furthermore, possession of such antiquities is a violation of the United Nations sanctions against Iraq, which means that they could be confiscated by customs authorities.

The most spectacular of these antiquities was a group of 28 Assyrian sculptures, including two human-headed lions and bull colossi.

Assyria is in fashion again, and its sculptures are bringing unprecedented prices. Russell claims in his book. In 1992, while carrying out research for the book, he observed an original sculpture still in place on the "Nineveh Porch" at Canford, now Canford School. In 1994 this sculpture was auctioned by the school for \$12 million, by far the highest price ever paid for an antiquity.

Under the United Nations sanctions against Iraq, resources have been diverted from non-essential areas such as the preservation of antiquities and heritage to cover basic necessities. For antiquities and heritage, the combination of local desperation and international demand is a recipe for disaster. Some Iraqis with nothing left to sell have evidently turned to selling off bits of Iraq's rich heritage. These relatively small fragments would be easy to conceal and smuggle out of the country, most likely through the Kurdish territory only a few miles to the north of Mosul, but also possibly through Iran, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, or Saudi Arabia. They then might be hidden until a buyer could be located.

In November 1996, Russell was contacted by a lawyer acting on behalf of a prospective buyer who had photographs of ten Assyrian sculptures that were said to be on the market. The lawyer wanted to know if they were being sold legitimately. They were not. Nine of the ten new pieces are fragments of wall relief from the Sennacherib Palace Site Museum. All nine fragments had been broken from large wall slabs that were intact in the museum in 1990.

"They had not merely been broken from the edges of a few slabs. Each fragment came from a different slab, and most had been broken from the middle of a slab, suggesting that the looters extracted the best-preserved bits, destroying the remainder in the process."

"Formerly intact, and partially intact, slabs

are now apparently piles of rubble. The tenth fragment is evidently from the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad, which was being stored at Nineveh in 1990."

"Strangely enough," Russell explained, "the large wall slabs have been converted into small marketable fragments. Each piece is a portion of a large slab. In cases where the surrounding surface was not well preserved, these parts were broken away to create a well-preserved fragment."

"A similar case is a fragment that shows small figures behind a city wall. On the original slab, there were large figures of soldiers directly above the city. These were completely broken away, evidently so that their large scale would not distract from the interest of the miniature scene below," added Russell.

But why is this happening now? Russell said, "The United Nations sanctions against Iraq have finally destroyed Sennacherib's palace, finishing the work begun by the ancient Medes and Babylonians who sacked Nineveh in 612BC. To be sure, market and political forces are also at work here, but the fact remains that without the sanctions, this destruction would not have happened."

Today the Sennacherib Palace Site Museum at Nineveh represents a world heritage disaster of the first magnitude. Immediate emergency conservation measures are required to preserve what remains of its sculptures. One might think that international support for such a crucial undertaking could be readily obtained, but the obstacles appear insurmountable. The same United Nations sanctions that have contributed to the destruction of the palace museum also prohibit any form of outside cultural assistance to Iraq. The United Nations sanctions committee has repeatedly refused to grant permission for international teams to assess actual and potential damage to the cultural heritage of Iraq in the wake of the Gulf War. There is an urgent need for documentation and conservation of Iraqi monuments considering the wartime damage and the postwar looting.

Russell believes that the hostility towards Iraq's heritage reflects a widespread misunderstanding in the West, "which fails to make the connection between modern Iraq and ancient Mesopotamia, the 'Cradle of Civilisation'. This heritage disaster also highlights the role of the West as a myopic consumer of heritage, a vanishing irreplaceable shared resource," he added.

On site

Solar lighting by night

TOURISTS will soon be able to admire the monuments of Luxor and Aswan by night. Solar lighting systems are being installed at the foot of Aswan's Nileometer on Elephantine Island, the Theban hills and the Valley of the Kings in Luxor.

The systems are similar to the one used by the Louvre. The project, costing half a million French francs, is funded by a grant from the French Government.

Kom Ombo temple renovated

THE GRAECO-Roman temple at Kom Ombo is undergoing restoration and its surroundings are receiving the attention of landscape specialists. Focus is on the inner chambers of the temple dedicated to the gods Horus and Sobek.

The temple was constructed of rock brought from the ancient mines of Silsila, an area exploited by the pharaohs to build many of their monuments.

Never too late for Horus

THE ANCIENT deity would be pleased with the Ministry of Culture, which has allocated \$1.5 million to restore his magnificent temple at Edfu.

The work will be carried out in two phases, the first focusing on the main temple and subsidiary constructions. The existing entrance to the site will be shifted a few metres away from the temple itself and provided with a ticket booth. The wall reliefs and inscriptions will undergo restoration work and a new lighting system will be installed.

The second phase of the project aims to prevent encroachment on the temple's eastern side by unauthorised peddlers.

Champollion in the lecture hall

IT IS 175 years since the French scholar Champollion first stared at a rock and made it speak.

This month, the Luxor Governorate is marking the occasion with a number of lectures and exhibitions on the life and work of the man who made the decisive breakthrough in understanding the previously indecipherable Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Reported by **Nevine El-Aref**

Site tours

Buses

Super Jet, East Delta and West Delta buses operate throughout Egypt.

Super Jet

Super Jet services are located in Almaza (Heliopolis), Tahrir, Giza, Ramses Street and Cairo Airport. Buses travel to Alexandria, Port Said, Hurghada and Sinai. Tel. 772-663.

Cairo-Alexandria

Services almost every half hour from 5.30am to 10pm, from Tahrir, then Giza, Almaza and the airport. Tickets LE19 until 9pm; LE21 thereafter; from the airport LE24 until 5pm; LE30 thereafter. A VIP bus with phone access leaves Almaza at 7.15am. Tickets from Almaza LE28; from the airport LE32 each way.

Cairo-Marsa Matruh

Services at 7am departure and 7pm return from Almaza and Tahrir Square. Tickets LE36. Cairo-Sidi Abdel-Rahman Services at 6.30am, 7am, 8am, 9am and 3.45pm. Tickets LE32. Cairo-Port Said Services every half hour from 6am to 8am; then 8am, 10am, 11am, and 4.30pm, from Almaza, then Ramses Street. Tickets LE15 each way.

Alexandria-Port Said

Service 6.45am, from Ramses Square in Alexandria. Departs Port Said 5.30pm. Tickets LE22 each way.

Cairo-Hurghada

Services 8am and 2pm, from Tahrir, then Giza and Almaza. Departs Hurghada noon and 5pm. Tickets LE40 until 5pm, LE45 thereafter, both each way.

Alexandria-Hurghada

Service 8pm, from Ramses Square, Alexandria. Departs Hurghada 2.30pm. Tickets LE60 each way. Cairo-Sharm El-Sheikh Service 11pm, from Tahrir, then Almaza. Departs Sharm El-Sheikh 11pm. Tickets LE50 each way.

East Delta Bus Company

Buses travel to North/South Sinai, Sinai, Suez and Ismailia. Buses to Ismailia and Suez depart from Qalili (near Ramses Square), Almaza and Tagmid Square (near Heliopolis). Buses to North and South Sinai depart from the Sinai bus station at Abbassia Square. Tel. 482-4753.

Cairo-Ismailia

Services every 45 minutes from 6.30am to 6pm, from Qalili, then Almaza and Tagmid Square. Tickets deluxe bus LE5.75; air-conditioned bus LE5.25, one way.

Cairo-Suez

Services every half hour from 6am to 7pm, from Qalili, then Almaza and Tagmid Square. Tickets deluxe bus LE5.75; air-conditioned bus LE5.25, one way.

Cairo-El-Arish

Service every hour from 7.30am to 4pm, from Qalili, then Almaza and Tagmid Square. Tickets deluxe bus LE21; air-conditioned bus LE13, one way.

Cairo-Sharm El-Sheikh

Services every 45 min. from 7am to 6.30pm, from Abbassia, then Almaza. Tickets morning LE27; evening LE40, one way.

Cairo-Norabia

Service 8am, from Abbassia, then Almaza. Tickets deluxe bus LE31.

West Delta Bus Company

Stations at Tahrir and Almaza. Tel. 243-1846.

Cairo-Hurghada

Services 9am, noon, 3pm, 10.30pm, 10.45pm and 11pm. Tickets LE30 one way.

Cairo-Safra

Services 9am and 3pm. Tickets LE35 one way.

Cairo-Cassini

Service 10pm. Tickets LE38 one way.

Cairo-Luxor

Service 9am. Tickets LE35 one way.

Cairo-Aswan

Service 3pm. Tickets LE50 one way.

Trains

Trains run to Alexandria, Port Said, Luxor and Aswan, from Ramses Station. Tel. 147 or 575-3553.

Cairo-Luxor-Aswan

"French" deluxe trains with sleepers. Services to Luxor and Aswan

7.40pm and 9pm (reaching Luxor 6.40 am and 8am, Aswan 4.40am and 6am). Tickets to Luxor LE34 for sleepers and LE120 for day-travel. To Aswan: LE360 for day-travel, LE141 for Egyptians.

"Spinal" deluxe train without sleepers.

Services to Luxor and Aswan. Tickets to Luxor: first class LE51, second class LE31. Tickets to Aswan: first class LE63; second class LE37.

Cairo-Alexandria

"Turbin" train. VIP train. Service 8am. Tickets first class LE37 with a meal; LE22 without a meal. Standard train. Services 9am, 11am, noon, 5pm and 7pm. Tickets first class LE22; second class LE17.

"French" trains

Services hourly from 6am to 10.30pm. Tickets first class LE30; second class LE12.

Cairo-Port Said

Services 6.20am and 8.45am. Tickets first class LE45; second class LE26.

EgyptAir

There are between two and five domestic flights daily. Check EgyptAir. Killy 390-0999. Optima 390-2444; or Elton 772410.

Cairo-Aswan

Tickets LE531 for Egyptians, LE1143 for foreigners, both round-trip.

Cairo-Luxor

Tickets LE259 for Egyptians, LE896 for foreigners, both round-trip.

Cairo-Hurghada

Tickets LE279 for Egyptians, LE896 for foreigners, both round-trip.

Cairo-Sharm El-Sheikh

Tickets LE287 for Egyptians, LE945 for foreigners, both round-trip.

Egyptian tourism on the Internet

Here are some useful addresses on the Internet, including tourism magazines, archaeology and travel agency programmes:

<http://www.egypt.gov.eg/links.htm> is an address through which you can access other useful tourism addresses on the Internet. Here they are:

<http://www.egypt.gov.eg/tourism.htm> is the address of Egypt's Tourism Net which provides directions of Egypt's hotels, restaurants, cruise lines, travel agents, transportation companies and tourist attractions. Egypt's tourism net is a part of Egypt's home pages (culture, health, environment, etc.) created by the EDCS as a part of the nation's information highway.

<http://163.123.104.141/egypt.htm> is the key to Egypt. It is a list of Egypt's tourist sites, such as the Red Sea, Cairo, Luxor, Aswan, the Sinai, Alexandria, Giza and the Nile. The sites are described. The magazine also contains colour photographs of Egypt.

<http://www.memphis.edu/egyptology.htm> is the address of the University of Memphis, and describes their projects in Egypt.

<http://www.ccg.org.eg/egypt.htm> is the address of Egypt's Tours and Travel, which organises packages for people who want to visit Egypt. It is an Egyptian tour operator, who all Egyptian tourist sites are listed and described.

<http://www.precious.com/TheTropic720.htm> is the address of The Curse of the Pharaohs. It includes photographs of ancient tombs and temples.

<http://www.egyptianmagazine.com> is the address of The Arabian Horse Worldwide Guide. This guide aims to promote the world's most beautiful and versatile horse — the Arabian. <http://www.egyptianmagazine.com> is a 2,000-page magazine, published by the Ministry of Tourism, where all Egyptian tourist sites are listed and described.

<http://www.dan.com.eg/city> is the address of the Cairo Scene, Cairo's first on-line art and entertainment guide. It is the most up-to-date source on where to go and what to do in Cairo. It lists also reviews of books and the latest CDs besides proposed places to visit like Wadi Rayan.

<http://www.south.virginia.edu/~egypt> is the site of Exodus Egypt, a daily site covering home news including political, social and cultural events.

Sunny summer deals

Hotels and travel agencies are still offering special prices which are valid for Egyptians and foreign residents.

Travel agencies

New City Travel is offering trips to Paris, London, Damascus and Beirut. Trips to Paris go for LE1890 for 8 days including accommodation on breakfast basis. Another 15-day trip combines Paris and London for LE3990 including accommodation in three-star hotels including open buffet breakfast. A week trip to Damascus and Beirut costs LE2090. The price includes accommodation in four-star hotels on breakfast basis.

Hotels

Cairo Pyramids Park Hotel, an Inter-Continental global partner resort, is offering a single room for LE160 and a double for LE180 including service fees and taxes, 20 per cent discount on all food items, free shuttle bus to city centre and free use of the exercise room. Prices are valid until October.

Sonesta Hotel Cairo is offering double rooms for LE220 and singles for LE200 including breakfast and taxes.

South Sinai

Sharm El-Sheikh Sonesta Beach Resort Sharm El-Sheikh is offering a rate of LE260 for double rooms and LE190 for single rooms including breakfast, taxes and services. Coral Bay Resort is offering a rate of LE120 per person for double rooms and is also offering a rate of LE700 for 7 nights including breakfast. Prices are valid until the end of September.

Delah Novotel Delah is offering a rate of LE200 per person for double rooms for three days including breakfast buffet. The offer is valid until September 1997.

Red Sea

Sonesta Beach Resort Hurghada is offering a rate of LE260 for double rooms and LE210 for singles on half-board basis including taxes and service charge.

Compiled by **Rehab Saad**

Telephone Numbers of Cairo Offices

Airport
2441460-2452244
Movenpick (Karnak)
2911830-4183720
Heliopolis
2908453-2904528
Abbassia
830888-2823271
Nasr City
2741871-2746499
Karnak - Kasr El Nil
5750600-5750868
Karnak - Nasr City
2741953-2746336
Shubra
2039072/4-2039071
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
5749714
Adli
3900999-3902444
Opera
3914501-3900999
Talaat Harb
3930381-3932836
Hilton
5759806-5747322
Sheraton
3613278-3488630
Zamalek
3472027-3475193

'Amm Ahmed:

For years, his stories have been read by others. Now he speaks for himself



photo: Yves Pans

Trials and tribulations

"God has always taken care of me. He has always seen to it that I want for nothing. *Al-Hamdu Lillah*. Whenever things look down, I talk to God directly. I question Him. 'I am your humble servant'. I tell Him. 'Why do you make me suffer?' Soon after, all wrongs are righted and I know that He has heard me. God is merciful."

"Those who pretend to know about religion disapprove of my ways. You should not talk to God and annoy him with your problems. You should go to the mosque and pray. Of course I go to the mosque and pray every day, but I feel that God needs to know when I am suffering, so I tell Him, and He watches over me. *Al-Hamdu Lillah*."

"Ibrahim, on Tuesday we are having a little reunion, like in the old days. Just a few brothers, I'll slaughter a calf. There will be plenty for everyone. Bring all your friends. You-know-who — I won't mention his name — has been speaking evil of me behind my back. My loved ones have turned their backs on me. He with the bad mouth used to love my stories. I told him the poems that came into my head. He came back for more. His friends became my friends and we were all like brothers, but when I had told him enough to fill the books he is writing, when he no longer needed the stories of my village, he pushed me away. He thought I was going to ask him to pay me for all the words I gave him. What a fool!"

"I miss our evenings. I haven't seen Hagg Salah for such a long time! You, Ibrahim, can tell him to come on Tuesday. Tell him that what he has heard is not true. Ah! All these days of sadness after I heard that you-know-who was bad-mouthing me! Food in my mouth turned to ashes. 'It has a bad smell.' I would tell the *Haggas* when she brought my supper, and all the time I knew that the bad smell came from inside me. The smell of friends turning against friends. I even stopped enjoying my *shishas*. I went to the doctor. 'You need rest and vitamins,' he said. What can vitamins do, I ask you, when one's heart is being torn apart? But no more. I will see my friends. I will explain and it will be like it always was. Tuesday. Bring all your friends, Ibrahim, make sure they all come, Hagg Salah and Hameida, Gaber and the doctor and *Ustad* Nawwar and also that nice young man who came with you last time to the café. He is a journalist, isn't he? Maybe I'll tell him my stories and maybe he will write them better than you-know-who. He changed a lot of things. He even changed the name of my village. Why, I ask you? And if he did not like my stories, why did he come for more? There are many people who are interested by my life, but not him. He wants to pick and choose and change things as it suits him. He has changed so much that it is not my story at all. De-

ceit, we live in a world of deceit. I wonder why he changed the name of my village? I come from the Sa'id, Kum Saad El-Gharbi, in the district of Safta near Assiut. He came to Haret El-Agouz, where we are now, and sat on this couch like you, in this large house that I bought with the help of God and in which I have gathered my children and the children of my divorced daughter and God has allowed me to provide for all of them. *Al-Hamdu Lillah*."

"In his book he says that my village is in the Delta. Whatever for? Never mind, I forgive him. One must always forgive, for one's heart to remain pure. Maybe when he became a writer and they printed his books, he thought that he knew better than an ignorant fishmonger like myself. And maybe he thought 'Amm Ahmed can't read, he will never know.' But I have many friends who read and they told me. They said, 'Allah, 'Amm Ahmed, do you know that he says in his book that you come from the Delta? I am a Sa'id with a Sa'id character, different from the people of the Delta, he cannot change that now, can he?' 'Do you want to hear 'Amm Ahmed's real story? I want to tell it in my own words and I don't want anything changed."

"As I said, I was born in this little village near Assiut. My father was a labourer. We were poor but I loved my village and the canal. The richer boys had fishing rods and nets and they used to cast them with big gestures, like this... and bring out nothing. I would crouch on the edge of the canal playing in the water with my bare hands and suddenly there would be fish everywhere begging to be gathered in my *galabiya*. I would run home, water dripping down my legs with the fish jumping against my belly. 'Hide your catch,' my mother would whisper, pulling me quickly into our house. 'They will give us the evil eye.' My mother used to cook some of the fish for us and give the rest to the neighbours. Their sons did not have my luck and we did not have an ice box."

"My father died when I was 14. There were four girls — my sisters — and a nursing baby. When the *rais* who hired labourers came to our house, my mother agreed on a sum of money and told me to go with him. I was the breadwinner now. I went with the other boys that the *rais* had gathered on the Giannakis plantations to pick grapes. The *rais* paid each boy nine piastres a day which he kept until we could make up the sum he had given to our parents. Once my debt was repaid, like the other boys, I told him to save the money for me because I had nowhere to hide it. We slept in the fields and we only had the clothes on our back."

"I kept adding the daily nine piastres in my head. After a while I had a great deal of nine piastres saved and I felt proud. I would give them

all to my mother when I went back to our village. One day we woke up and the *rais* had disappeared, taking our piastres with him. We went to see the *khanaga* who owned the land. He said it was none of his business and to go look for our *rais*... We walked for a long time aimlessly. Finally I asked God why this had happened to me. 'It is unfair,' I told Him. 'I worked very hard and the money was for those orphans at home.' Soon after a truck driver stopped and agreed to give us a ride. He drove us to Damanhour and we parted company. I decided to go to Cairo where I knew we had relatives in Torah. I climbed on the roof of a train and rode to Cairo. When I arrived in Torah, I could not remember the name of our relatives but they were hiring boys to carry stones from the quarries. They paid me seven piastres a day. Labour was cheap in those days. It was a long time ago. Do you know how old I am, Ibrahim? I was born in 1933, it is written on my card. That makes me what? Well, older than you, anyway! So, as I was saying, seven piastres in those days was the going rate for someone who busted his head carrying stones from dawn to dusk. The *rais* who was hiring me told me one day that I looked clever and would like to work with explosives? It was dangerous but they would pay me well, ten piastres a day to start with. I went to the mountain and I learned. I earned 12 piastres a day the first month and soon I was making over 50. Now I could save and send my family LE 2.00 a month. I went to the post office every month for that. After a year I had enough to buy myself a smart *galabiya* and shoes with an elastic band. 'Ahmed, it is time to go back to the village,' I told myself."

"You should have seen my mother's tears of joy when she saw me all grown in my new *galabiya* and wearing shoes. All the neighbours came around for the celebrations. I did not want to go back to Cairo. I was grown now and had experience. I worked as a *ghaffir* [caretaker] for Mahmoud Bay Niazi in Maghagha and set myself up as a *rais* and went to work with my men for Qout El-Qouloub El-Demerdashia in Ayat and also for Tawfik Megalli El-Wahsh in Matat, Hamed Guda in Kafr Anwar and Mohamed Pasha Mahmoud who had hundreds of faddans of orchards in Fashn. I was making good money and it was time for me to get married. My mother chose me a bride, a girl from her own family who lived in a village close by."

"My father-in-law's relatives were fishmongers in Cairo. They worked in the quarter of Baghala. We moved to Cairo so that I could work with them. I found a couple of rooms in Istabl Antar and for the next 15 years I went every morning to the fish auction at Ghamra, took my fish to Sayeda

Zeinab, washed it, arranged it in a basket and, placing the basket on my head, walked the streets from the Tanneries to the Quarries, then Mar Guirguis, El-Malek El-Saleh and finally Manial. Every day for 15 years."

"Well, it was not written that we would stay together for ever. I had a big fight with my wife's relatives and I asked my wife to choose. She chose me, of course, and we went back to my village. For a month, I remained without work, but all the time I was racking my brain. One day, I told God: 'You made me fight with those people, are you going to let us starve? I am Your faithful servant and I go to the mosque for prayers and it is they, not I, who started the quarrel.' There and then an idea came to my mind. With all my savings I bought a television set which was powered with batteries and I rented a small shop that I made into a café. The people of my village had never seen a television. They spent most of their free time at the café and business boomed. But it was written that I had to lead a hard life. No sooner had they built the High Dam, than our village was blessed with electricity and my clients deserted me."

"I went to Assiut and visited the fish market there. I introduced myself as a fishmonger from Cairo. 'Who do you know in Cairo?' asked the head of the fishmongers. I gave him names. He was convinced that I was a real fishmonger and invited me to work with them. I had my place in the market and was happy for eleven years. My children were growing up and life was good. I gave thanks to God every day for my good fortune."

"One day, quite unexpectedly, I received a telegram from my sister who had married and was now living in Cairo. It said: 'Come at once'. Nothing else. What could I do? I went, fearing the worst. My sister and her family were living in Manshiet Nasser and had rented a shop for me, my sister told me. The conditions were favourable and there was plenty of work. I had to leave Assiut at once and join them, because with two shops we would have a great deal of influence. I told her that I was happy in Assiut. I wanted to go back that very day but my sister was alone. When I enquired about my brother-in-law, she did not give me a clear answer. He will be back soon, she kept telling me. When he finally arrived, he had my wife, my children and our furniture with him. What could I do? I stayed."

"Do you remember, Ibrahim, the elections at the time of the Gulf War? During the elections a man came around Manshiet Nasser's fish market and asked us if we wanted cards which would state that we were legal and rightfully exercising our

trade. We said yes, of course. 'All you have to do is fill in this paper, name, address, date of birth, and give me two pounds.' We all did and he used these papers to pretend that we had all elected him head of the fishmongers. But the traders at the market refused to be fooled in such a dirty way. They all came out against him. Every one of them came out of his shop shouting 'Amm Ahmed is the *rais* of the souq'. I would have none of it of course, but they kept shouting until the officials came and the police. 'They want you for their *rais* of the fishmongers of Manshiet Nasser.' See, it is written here under my name. When we moved to Obour Market, I remained the *rais*. Once they are happy with someone they don't let him go. I make sure that the rules are obeyed, that all the contracts are in order, that there is no cheating or irregular business going on. When there is a fight, I decide who is right and who is wrong. I am always fair. This is why they trust me."

"Now everyone gives me due respect when I sit in the evening at the café. I used to smoke evening *shisha* among my dear friends, while contemplating the splendour of Qait Bay Mosque, and feel that life was good indeed in the most beautiful city in the world. *Al-Hamdu Lillah* a thousand times, I used to think."

"You-know-who had to come and spoil it all, telling people that I had changed since I had become the *rais* of the souq. Do you know how I met him? He used to sit at the café with all his papers scribbling in his small notebooks all the time. Well, one day, he came with a friend. Later that day, coming out of the mosque, after evening prayers, I found this thick gold chain with a medallion right under my feet. I took it home and showed it to my wife. 'You have to keep it for three days and if at the end of this period nobody claims it, it is yours,' she said. I put the chain in my pocket and forgot about it. The next day, I was smoking my *shisha* at the café as usual, when you-know-who appeared with his friend. They were asking if something unusual had been found lying on the floor, the previous day. 'Something like this, for instance?' I asked, taking the chain out of my pocket. This is when we became friends and I started telling him the stories of my village. He filled many notebooks with them."

"Now the tobacco of the *shisha* is bitter on my tongue and I look at the Qait Bay minaret and think that maybe I am mistaken and it is not the most beautiful sight in the world. But on Tuesday, my friend, I will be happy again."

Profile by Fayza Hassan and Mahmoud El-Wardani

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